Table of Contents

Prologue
First Bone: One Winged Crow
Second Bone: Mystery on a Rainy Night
Third Bone: Lizzie Borden on August 4th
Epilogue

(The prologue doesn't have quotation marks, but think of it like dialogue)

Prologue

Sensei, I'm recording this.

Well, okay, but… Isn't it unpleasant? This sort of feels weird.

What should I say?

…

…I met him during the spring and summer of the year after Futaba died. It was near the end of May when I was in my third year of high school. Under the elm tree in front of the dilapidated house. I fell in love with him.

I was his model, he made so many paintings of me. I always had dirty-coloured butterfly wings on my back. I thought it suited me, though. They could have been white or black, but instead they were a light brown that wasn't pretty at all.

Do you know what a palette knife that's used for art is? The blade starts off round, but the more you use it, the more it comes to a point. His knife was sharp like a needle, it looked like it was about to break. He left a mark on my skin with it every time we met. It was painful, but I was happy. It was like he was carving a secret promise between us. Besides, I was always happiest if he was happy. I trusted him, so I didn't care what he did.

He told me he loved me. That I belonged to him, that I was the only one who brought him joy. I was glad to be special to someone.

No, it wasn't scary. Rather, I think I would have been fine with it if he wanted to kill me. It would probably have been a pretty pathetic death, but I would have been glad to be with him for eternity. I would have liked to be sent to heaven, rather than go home. I didn't care if I went to hell, as long as I was with him.

But at the end of summer, around August, Hitoe came. Everything changed. He started drawing Hitoe instead. It's like he didn't care about me anymore. I don't even want to think about what those two were doing together. Every time I saw her smiling at him, or laughing like they had a secret, it drove me crazy.

Then, he took notice of me again. He used his palette knife to draw butterfly wings on my back, and told me to use the knife to kill Hitoe. But then I thought about how Futaba would feel. I couldn't kill Hitoe in that abandoned house. It would be the same as losing. I hated Hitoe. But I hated Futaba, who made Hitoe do that, even more. That's why I chose not to kill Hitoe. If I started to hate her more, I figured I could just kill her then. He told me exactly what to do, how to process the body, and how to hide it. So before I did anything, I decided to leave him. It was hard, but it had to be done. After all, it wasn't just our secret anymore.

But less than a month later, he left the old house. I never saw him again after that. No, I really haven't met him since. I never will meet him again, either, since I failed. I failed to kill

Hitoe. I couldn't fly. My butterfly wings withered, so I couldn't fly. But that's fine. We were both abandoned, after all.

Hm? Why do I think he stopped meeting us? …Because Hitoe couldn't fly.

But what about me? I have no idea. It feels strange, since I know he's in the wrong. I know that it's not the right thing to do. Behind his beautiful face was just an evil, disgusting caterpillar. But I still remember. I'll never forget. The feeling when that caterpillar chose me. If he came to pick me up again some day, I don't know if I'd be able to refuse. But I don't think he will. I'm sure he's already found someone else, someone who won't say no to him.

…

Yeah, I'm sure. He must have found a butterfly with pure white wings, unlike Hitoe and I.

First Bone: One Winged Crow

Part 1

One summer's day, after a crow built a nest in the ginkgo tree in the school yard and caused problems for all the teachers, I got a call from Sakurako-san so I'm going to visit her. It's already the height of summer, and the Kujo residence is surrounded by dark green plants. The white house looks even lighter with the sunlight reflecting off of it. The contrast between the blue sky, green vegetation, and white siding is truly the image of the "Kujo residence" that's burned into my mind. Maybe it's because I first met her during summer, but Sakurako-san always brings this season to mind for me. She was born in the season for cherry blossoms, though, and her personality is rather icy.

A familiar car is parked in front of the gate to the house. It must be Sawa-san from the Asahikawa zoo. He's probably only here for something involving a specimen. I immediately realize the reason I was called here.

It's hard work to put together a skeleton in the blazing heat, even if you don't care about the putrid scent. It can't be helped, though. They make specimens because there was a "death" there. Death comes regardless of whether or not it inconveniences living humans. No matter how much you struggle against it, death is always waiting.

"Oh? You already cleaned it?"

I came in expecting an unthinkable odour, so I'm surprised that there's only the faint scent of old building. Hector sniffs me then gives me a lick as a greeting while I untie my shoes.

"Yeah, it's a crow. I'm going to let you assemble it." Sakurako-san says with her arms crossed, standing behind the big, white fluff ball.

"Oh…"

Sakurako-san welcomes me with a big smile. She's wearing jeans and a summery, short sleeved shirt. I'm glad I don't have to deal with the actual corpse, but learning to assemble a crow skeleton wasn't exactly how I wanted to spend my day.

"But a crow, huh?" I accidentally say out loud to myself.I guess I don't really hate doing this kind of thing anymore.

Sawa-san is carefully sorting out the small, pure white bones. "Hey," he says, and raises one hand to greet me. It's unusual for me to see him in plain clothes. He's wearing a t-shirt and

cargo pants, making them look almost like brother and sister. It makes me feel kind of like I don't belong.

"I brought the jungle and carrion today, since I thought it'd make it easier to compare."

Sawa-san beckons Hector over to pet his head. Hector brings his rope over, and looks like he wants to play.

"Jungle and carrion?"

"It's short for jungle crow and carrion crow. They're the two kinds of crow you usually see in Asahikawa," Sakurako-san says, gently petting the tiny skull.

After getting Hector to calm down and stop begging to play, we head to the living room to get to work. No matter what I have to do, I love the stories about "living things" that they tell me. Bones are death itself, but they're still full of "life."

"I didn't know there were different kinds of crow."

"They live in slightly different habitats, but there's lots of carrion and jungle crows in Asahikawa."

I'm all too familiar with crows. They scatter garbage everywhere when you leave the bags out for pickup, and they attack people who approach their nests, no matter how many times you take them down. The crows at school drop branches on people, swoop down at them, and even physically attack them. Since the janitor wears a Fighters baseball hat when removing the nest, the crows have started attacking anyone wearing a ball cap relentlessly. It was such a problem for the baseball club that they had to wear those red and white hats for elementary schoolers during their summer practices.

"I always associate crows with being pests."

They dig through the garbage, but they're strangely smart.

"Carrion crows ruin fields in rural areas, and jungle crows dig through trash in cities, but they're supposed to be omnivores that live in the forests. They can't just be ignored, since they live so close to humans, but they're not all bad. Crows were originally the 'janitors of the forest.'"

"Janitors?"

"They eat harmful bugs, and the corpses of small animals. A janitor is a popular and accurate name for scavenging animals. While they do eat crops, they also eat insects that damage the crops. Their vision is excellent, but they can't smell very well, so they can eat stink bugs with no problems."

"Really…"

They're definitely important for the food chain. Still, even knowing that they can be beneficial doesn't change my impression of them. I'm tired of dealing with them all the time. I must have let my dissatisfaction show on my face, because Sawa-san and Sakurako-san both look at me. Sawa-san smiles at me like he can tell what I'm thinking. No, maybe he's smiling because he's confident he can change my opinion on crows.

But I've been thinking. By the time this specimen has been assembled, I might come to like crows. I'm a simple person, after all. After learning about the charms of snakes at Tainaka-san's house, I want a pet snake now. However, snakes don't impact my direct environment, so any unpleasant feelings they cause are different from crows, who cause actual damage.

"Although there's differences between their calls and behaviour, it's difficult for me to distinguish between their flying form. 'Is this one the carrion? This one is big, so maybe it's the

jungle?' I'm always saying things like that. But if you arrange them like this, it's much easier to tell."

"So this big one is the jungle crow?"

"That's right. The easiest difference to see is the beak. If it's thick and a little curved, it's a jungle crow. The carrion crow's beak is more slender," Sawa-san says while pointing at parts of the bones.

They're about one size larger than the group of bones that Sakurako-san has separated. Sawa-san shows me a picture on his phone. It's a typical crow. Jet black and shiny. But if you look closely, you can see that it looks almost metallic, and shines in a rainbow of colours.

"Isn't the glossiness like a high quality ink? It's because the layer of keratin on the feathers diffuses light, making it a structural colour. The amount of melanin in the feathers makes a difference, too. The amount of molecules is different, but it's the same principle as peacock feathers."

Sakurako-san strokes the feathers and bits of flesh on the bones as she tells me "this is the humerus."

The humerus connects to the radius and ulna. It's the drumstick part of the chicken wings you eat, and people have the same structure. It's a specialized bone for flight, kind of like how the pterygoid bone is specialized.

"Wah!"

It's light. When I'm invited to pick it up, I'm surprised by how light it is. It's astonishing.

"The carrion crow is about 56cm long, but their wingspan is up to 1m. They're generally short and stout, but they still only weigh about 700g. The bones are surprisingly light considering their size. They have interesting foreheads. Is it puffed up in that photo?"

When I look at the picture again, sure enough, the forehead is sticking out. When I compare it to the carrion crow, the bumpiness is even more clear.

"But those are actually feathers. You can tell from the bones."

"You're right. There's no bumps on the skull."

There's some slight differences in the beak and the shape of the face, but I can't see any big differences between the two crows. Basically they have different hairstyles. I'm lost in thought with the skull in my hands. Sawa-san smiles.

"Jungle crows are territorial, so people tend to dislike them despite how fascinating they are. Birds, including crows, usually raise their chicks as a couple. It's important for the pair to raise their chicks together. Even though they typically lay 4-5 eggs, less than half the chicks will leave the nest, and it takes around 6 months for them to mature."

So basically, they're only fiercely territorial because they're loving parents. I still think they could hold back a little.

"Crows don't only love other crows as a mated pair or as parent and child, they also make friends."

"They can have friends?"

That's pretty surprising. I always thought they were more aggressive.

"When they're young, they make friends and play together like human children do. They share food, play games, and play-wrestle."

"Is that why they try to fight with me?"

I know they're smart, but they're also strangely human-like. It's amazing that wild animals like crows can have friends with other animals that aren't related to them by blood. I've seen gatherings of crows plenty of times before, but I always just saw them as a "flock" rather than a group that were hanging out together. They're living creatures with lives outside of just eating and sleeping. Thinking of them like that slowly chips away at my dislike for them.

"One can only envy their excellent memory," Sakurako-san says.

I make a sour expression. I definitely won't tell her that I didn't do so well on yesterday's test.

"The Japanese soccer association's mascot is Yatagarasu, a 3-legged crow that is worshipped in some areas. It's supposed to be a messenger for the goddess that can understand human speech."

I listen to Sawa-san and Sakurako-san tell me myths about crows while I look at the male jungle crow's wing bones. As much as I hate to admit it, I don't hate crows anymore. I really am a simple person, aren't I? The jungle crow is intelligent and curious. The carrion crow is small, doesn't typically dig through trash, and has a strange "goa goa" call.

They may seem cute to people in the city, but they still lay waste to crops in rural areas. Yet at the same time, they eat pests off the plants. I'm honestly starting to think the carrion crows are cute now. Anyway, I'm going to try observing the crows making noise outside before just labeling them as annoying from now on. Before I just thought of them as unpleasant.

"Crows have the ability to think. They can even communicate by voice. In 2005, Asahiyama zoo saved the life of a crow that was hit by a car and couldn't fly anymore due to losing a wing. They protected it at the zoo, and despite the inconvenience of only having one wing, it was able to use its skills to live quite well. I was very impressed."

I decide to get to work on assembling the skeleton. Bones look simple once you remove the other parts of the animal. They're so light, but they can withstand so much stress. Even the protrusion on the sternum is captivating.

"They're still annoying though…"

For example, even if they can show affection, they don't love me. I'm sure they'll be making a mess of the garbage again tomorrow, like always.

"There's no choice but to coexist. Earlier I said crows have good eyesight, but their sense of smell is quite lackluster. Although they have a good memory, they're very cautious. It'd be better if we could put out garbage in a way that wouldn't catch the eye of the crows."

Until now I never understood why we have to live together, but of course the answer is because we're alive. Asahiyama zoo still exhibits crows they're protecting. Even after the one winged crow passed away.

"They're the same as wolves," Sakurako-san says. "After exterminating so many wolves due to them being labelled as harmful, we're now killing deer because their numbers have grown too much. They're not even being killed for food, people are just looking for ways to use them as food after killing them just for the sake of having them dead. I'm sure that someday humans will only have corpses at their feet."

Sakurako-san sounds sad. I feel a chill run down my spine. She doesn't support taking any life, and she gets angry just thinking about it. They say the goddess Astraea, who governs good and evil, couldn't stand how much bloodshed humans had caused, so she ascended to

the sky and became the Virgo constellation holding the Libra. Even one of the goddesses in the stars was sick of how merciless and arrogant humans are.

But crows can be ferocious, and steal precious food. Wolves can kill people with their fangs, too. If I had to kill someone else to protect one of my loved ones, could I do it? Even if it was just, it's still cruel and heartless. I wonder if I could give my own life for my loved ones, too. I look down at the skeleton of a bird, who gave up "arms" to be able to fly. It doesn't know anything about "justice." I wonder if I would have to lose something in order to choose the right answer. If the day comes when I have to make that decision, I'll try to face this crow skeleton again. I hope I'll have a clear head about my decision.

Part 2

Several days later, my mom suddenly starts complaining that she needs clothes for summer. Apparently she wants to go buy new western style clothes. I don't care if she wants new clothes, but she's trying to drag me along with her.

"Your underwear is getting all pilly, you should get new ones."

That's the type of excuse she's using to get me to go with her. I don't need new underwear right now. If my mom decides she wants to buy something, I usually have no choice but to accept my fate. Maybe when she's distracted, I can go buy a new book… I decide to go shopping with her.

In the end, my mom is the only one who gets to make decisions. I'm just there to carry her bags. It's always like this, even when we're grocery shopping and she asks what I want for dinner. We walk around the Seibu department store, and the other stores near the station, in the morning. My mom keeps complaining "if I had a daughter, this would be a lot more fun" as if she isn't the one who gave birth to a son. I give her a light knock on the head to voice my dissatisfaction.

I look up and notice a crow staring at me from the top of a street light. Sawa-san said the crows shouldn't have a problem feeding, even downtown, since there's so many gypsy moths this year. It's fine by me if they want to eat poisonous bugs, but it's creepy being watched so intently. Why does it feel like this crow could suddenly start speaking to me at any moment? Something about the way this crow looks makes it seem different from other birds. I don't hate them as much as I used to, though.

Once we reach the commercial building that's connected to the station, my mom and I head off to do different things. I buy a book from the bookstore, then head to the food court. I start reading my book while munching on fries. I notice a group of girls who are sitting near me laughing. That's where Sakurako-san, Kasumi-chan, and I sat before. It brings back sudden memories of that day. I still think about that night when I met Nazuna-san and the others. I still have no idea what Hanabusa wanted me to do. I don't think they made me go there on a whim.

I still don't even know if I went against what they wanted from me, or if I was just their puppet. Even after such an extraordinary day, my daily life hasn't changed at all. Dawn still breaks, and morning still comes as usual. The sadness and fear of losing Wolf still hits in waves, but I have to hold it back. The only thing that changed was that I got more email penpals. Kasumi-chan in particular messages a lot, but Mika-san and the others occasionally send updates. I want to be able to help them whenever they need it, no matter when it is.

Sakurako-san and Isozaki-sensei seem to be monitoring me a little more closely lately, probably because of how I tried to do everything myself back then. I even got into a bit of a spat with Sakurako-san over it. That evening, Sakurako-san wouldn't let me go. Even though we knew about Utsumi-san's preparations, Sakurako-san still let Nazuna-san risk his life.

She made a clear choice. I'm truly grateful for that. But couldn't she have found another option? One that would keep both me and Nazuna-san safe? I just wish she hadn't had to make such a heartless choice. I occasionally send letters to Nazuna-san, but I never get a reply. At that moment, I chose not to stay by his side.

Speaking of letters, I lost my suicide note that day. It seems to have fallen out of my pocket at some point. I have a desire to go there and find it, but I can't bring myself to go back to that place. Fortunately, I didn't write my name on the letter, or address it to any particular person. If someone else finds it and picks it up, they won't know it was mine. That's all.

Everything changed on that one chaotic night. I wonder if "he" really existed, or if it's just my memory playing tricks on me. Was the person I was talking to really Hanabusa? I close my book since I can't concentrate.

Still, the noise of all the people around helps me calm down. Recently I've particularly liked listening to the peaceful voices of people while I play on my phone. It feels so full of life. Just me and people I don't know. Suddenly, my peace is rudely interrupted by someone sitting in the seat across from me.

"Hello, Tatewaki-kun."

When I hurriedly raise my head, the smile looking back at me isn't a stranger. Rather, I'm glad it's not a stranger.

"Aoba-san… Why are you here?"

"Running an errand for Professor Shitara. What about you?"

He takes off his suit jacket and puts it on a seat. In contrast to his neat, grey suit, his hair reaches down to his shoulders, making him look kind of like a playboy. He's wearing contacts instead of glasses today, making it easier to see his well defined facial features.

"I'm shopping with my mom, but we split up."

"So you're waiting for her?"

I nod. He smiles broadly.

"How admirable for a boy your age to still go shopping with his mom."

I can't tell for a moment if I'm being praised or ridiculed, so I don't know how to react.

"You must be bored, then. I have time, so let's have some tea. It'll be my treat."

I give a vague expression, then Aoba-san ruffles my hair. He always invades my personal space. It's probably the main reason I'm not very fond of him.

"It's okay, I don't need anything."

"What do you like? Ice cream?"

I was completely ignored. He certainly isn't shy, that's for sure. Still, why is ice cream the first thing he suggests? I'm not a child. I won't take it lying down.

"Coffee is fine."

"Do you drink it black?"

"…I'll have an iced cafe latte." I give a sulky reply.

Black coffee is too bitter. I can't drink it without milk. Aoba-san smiles at me like he's enjoying this. This guy really gives me a bad feeling. I offered to buy it instead, but he tells me I

can stay seated. To be honest, I'm scared that he'll put poison in it or something. Now that I think about it, he knows a lot about forensic medicine. I'm sure he knows exactly what kind of poison would be best to use.

"I didn't know whether or not you wanted chocolate and whipped cream."

After a while, he returns and hands me a coffee frappe with a mountain of whipped cream and chocolate on top.

"Mind if I try a sip?" Aoba-san snickers.

He has a black coffee. Is he trying to make fun of me? This definitely fits my tastes better than a cafe latte, though. After being bored from waiting for my mom, having a delicious drink feels really nice. I was just starting to get hungry, too.

"What have you been up to recently?" Aoba-san breaks the silence with a generic question, since the two of us have nothing in common.

"Recently, I've…"

I don't know how to answer. I take a minute to sort my thoughts. He puts his elbows on the table and leans forwards.

"Maybe you didn't catch my drift. I'm asking if you've gotten involved with Phantom again. Have they sent you any more messages?"

"…I…"

I haven't gotten any messages from Phantom. The fact that I haven't heard from them makes me uneasy. It's like being in water too deep to see the bottom.

"I want to know what Phantom is thinking, too. What do they believe in? Why are they targeting us? Sakurako-san says I shouldn't listen to them, since they never speak the truth."

Aoba-san suddenly laughs. "Not all people believe in something," he spits out. "What do you believe in?"

"I want to protect Sakurako-san."

His mouth twists into an evil sneer.

"Was that not the answer you wanted?"

"It wasn't a bad answer, but that's not a belief. It's a desire. You could even call it affection. A belief is something firmly rooted in your being, something that causes you to act without thinking. It's a strength that affirms who you are."

"Affirm yourself?"

When he puts it like that, I don't think I even believe in myself that much. I'm not a genius like Sakurako-san, after all.

"Don't take it too hard if you don't have a belief, you just haven't found your way yet. You're just a little lost right now. If someone leads the way, I'm sure you'll find it in no time. Just be careful of who that someone is."

"I-"

I try to speak, but he interrupts me.

"But some people never find a belief until the day they die, no matter how hard they look."

His voice is quiet, and full of pity. Or maybe it's sadness. Seeing the sadness in his eyes makes me feel deeply uncomfortable. I don't know how to put it, but he doesn't seem like the type to feel sadness or regret.

"Then do you think Phantom is killing people without a belief?"

“There’s people who can kill others as easily as they breathe.”

“…”

I know that well, unfortunately. Sakurako-san said before that the main reason people don’t murder other people is because of instinct, rather than ethics or laws.

Humans don’t like death. It’s revolting, scary, and repulsive. For most people, the act of taking a life is physically repulsive, but some people don’t feel that way. Others, like Sakurako-san and Aoba-san, just get used to it.

“I think Phantom is targeting us for a reason other than killing us. I think there’s a reason why they would involve themself with us, even if it meant not being able to kill us so easily.”

For example, he could have killed me if he wanted to on that night when I went to the abandoned house. I don’t think it was because he couldn’t. He just didn’t.

“It’s possible that killing you right now would go against his rules. Serial killers in particular value their rules. Sometimes there’s a reason behind those rules, but sometimes it’s like they’re trying to protect themselves by not deviating from the rails they set out.”

“But keeping us alive should be dangerous to him. Phantom absolutely knows that Sakurako-san isn’t an ordinary person.”

The noise of all the people enjoying their day off sounds so distant. It feels like I’m in a different world. Aoba-san is staring at me with a listless expression. I look back at him firmly. I feel like I can’t lose, even if we’re just looking at each other. I just can’t trust him. The way he speaks makes it seem like he knows more about Phantom than he lets on.

“…You can’t know a person’s true character, no matter how well you think you know them.” Aoba-san says suddenly after a moment of silence.

“Huh?”

In an instant all the sounds around me fade out and my ears start to ring.

“Then… Are you saying that Sakurako-san and I are waiting to become criminals?”

“Oh, look who it is!”

I start to feel dizzy from our conversation, but my mom’s cheerful voice suddenly interrupts us. The noise around me comes back all at once. I look back to see my mom carrying huge bags in both hands. Aoba-san nods at her.

“Mom, this is…”

I’m relieved to see her, but I also don’t know how to explain this situation. I don’t want these two getting involved with each other. Apparently they’re already acquainted, though. My mom thinks to herself, trying to remember his name.

“It’s Aoba. I’m glad to see that Shoutarou-kun is doing well.”

“Thank you for all your help back then.” My mom gives Aoba-san a polite bow.

My mom told me before that when I got stabbed in Hakodate, Aoba-san did a lot to help her out. He may have taken care of me, and everyone else seems to trust him, but all I hear are alarm bells going off when I see him. I’m positive that he knows more than he lets on.

“If you’re done shopping, let’s go already.”

I don’t want to listen to her making small talk. My mom agrees to leave. I really hope she doesn’t ask why we were together.

“I can carry this.”

I take a big bag from my mom.

“It’s fine. It’s heavy, so I was going to get a cart.”

Aoba-san takes the bag from me.

“Ah…”

“I’m not doing anything, so I’ll help carry it to your car.”

“But…”

“I got here a bit too early for my meetup. Thanks to Shoutarou-kun, I wasn’t bored. This area has gotten pretty flashy recently, so I wasn’t sure what to do alone.”

As usual, Aoba-san is too pushy and close for comfort as he takes my mom’s bags. My mom doesn’t want to trouble him, but she also doesn’t want to turn away his kindness. “Well, if you’d like to, then,” she says, glancing at me.

I want to stop him, but I don’t know how. While he carried our bags to the car, he mentioned that he came to Asahikawa by train today, and that he was heading for a medical college near our house. My mom offers to drive him there to thank him for helping us. He was definitely trying to get her to offer that. Maybe he just didn’t have the money for a taxi.

During the car ride, Aoba-san doesn’t say anything strange. He just makes small talk. However, when we go our separate ways, he hands me a note and gives me a wink.

“Phantom is a bloodthirsty killer. I have a duty to uphold the dignity of life. Phantom is the exact opposite.”

He seems to have noticed that I’m suspicious of him. I crumple up the note and stuff it in my pocket.

Part 3

It’s still dim and early in the morning. I look down at my phone and see it’s 5:00. I was working on a plastic model last night and didn’t go to sleep until almost 3am. A noise woke me up.

“Isn’t that a carrion crow? Jeez, there’s no food here for you.”

Outside my window there’s several crows calling. Carrions crows make more of a cacophony than sing a song. They mostly eat bugs, fruit, and seeds. They’re omnivores like the jungle crow, and will eat carcasses of small animals, but they mostly prefer plant based foods.

Oh, now that I think about it, my mom planted leaf lettuce in the garden. People always say they grow too many strawberries and tomatoes so they have to give them away, but my mom always manages to kill her plants. At least lettuce is pretty simple. It can’t be helped. I put on my parka and head down to the front door. My mom comes over, worried.

“Are you okay?”

“They’re probably just carrion crows, so they shouldn’t be too aggressive.”

I put on my sandals and head out the door. Still drowsy, I breathe in the dense scent of vegetation. It smells like a midsummer morning. The sun is still low, but it’s already getting hotter. The crows are crying loudly on the electrical wires and wisteria plants in front of the house across the street. I won’t run away even if they come over here. Just to be safe, I keep quiet. I wonder why they’re causing such an uproar.

I strain my tired eyes and get a bit closer until I can see a lump of black feathers lying on the stone walkway. My heart pounds. The crows keep their distance and continue to shriek. As I walk closer, it becomes clear what they’re cawing about.

“A c-crow…”

A one crow is lying limp on the pavement. There’s no noticeable wounds, but the area around it is dark and wet. I don’t move a muscle. I can tell from the awkward angle of its wings that it’s already dead.

“What… Is it doing here?”

The sound of the crows drowns out my words.

It’s like they’re having a funeral. Are they mourning the loss of their friend, or are they warning other crows of danger? Maybe they’re mad that something hurt one of their own. I feel like I can’t just leave it like this. The crow’s corpse is wet, even though it didn’t rain last night. If it had rained, the pavement would be wet everywhere, rather than just around the body. This crow must have come from somewhere else. Maybe someone killed it and dumped the body here. Wolf suddenly crosses my mind, but she’s already gone. This isn’t one of the presents she left for me. I hurry home to change clothes, then rush out again.

“Where are you going this early?!”

“I’ll be back soon!”

I carefully pick up the crow and put it in a bag, then hop on my bike. There’s only one place I can go.

The Kujou family gets up early. Gran’s an early bird, but I’m hesitant to just drop by unannounced at 6am. I can’t wait, though. Fortunately, gran is awake and lets me into the living room. Hector seems to have misinterpreted my visit. He’s staring at me with his leash in his mouth like he’s saying, “are we going on an early morning walk, Shoutarou-san?!”

“Honestly, you should learn some manners,” Sakurako-san says with a big yawn.

I know that it was impolite to visit this early, but I don’t exactly want to hear that from *her*. She quickly changes her tune when I show her the crow corpse.

“I take back what I said, you’re very polite.” Sakurako-san smiles and puts on her nitrile gloves.

I explain why I brought it, so she starts to dissect it. I put on a mask and gloves so I can watch. Strangely, I don’t feel disgusted by this anymore. The crow has already gone into rigor mortis, but it hasn’t really started decomposing. Sakurako-san says it’s been under 24 hours since it died, probably in the last half a day. There’s a bone fracture in the left wing.

“Both the skull and the ulna are cracked. Thanks to the thick, elastic periosteum, it doesn’t seem to have been completely broken. It wouldn’t have been able to fly in this state, though. There’s a bit of internal bleeding.”

“Is the bone fracture the reason it died?”

“No… It probably isn’t. The lungs are filled with water.”

Since there’s no obvious external trauma, she says the cause of death was probably drowning.

“The stomach is full of apples, so it likely wasn’t raising any chicks. It’s likely it was living near humans. It could have been attacked by another animal, or fallen into a river… But if that were the case, why is this the only trauma?” Sakurako-san groans.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just don’t know the situation that caused this crow’s death. Something feels wrong.”

“Oh…”

If you ask me, death in general feels wrong.

“I can’t imagine that someone just captured the crow because it was harassing them and then drowned it. Sorry, but I can’t picture the death of this crow right now.”

“Would it have been that hard to catch it? Like… A trap or sleeping pills, for example. Or a tranquilizer.”

“How would they measure the right dose for the crow? That would only be possible for a veterinarian or health care worker. Anaesthesia in particular requires qualification. You can’t use things like that unless you know the correct dosage. If there’s too little it won’t work, and if there’s too much it would have caused death.” Sakurako-san shakes her head with a bitter expression. “I often hear about it with wild animals, like brown bears, where they can’t arrange for someone to handle the anaesthesia, or even when experts can’t determine the right dosage, so they have to kill the animal. It’s difficult to determine weight by sight, and if you get the dosage wrong, it puts the life of the capturer at risk. It also takes time for it to work.”

“And if their safety is at risk then… they’d have to shoot it.”

“That’s right. Drugs require technical knowledge. In that case it would have been better to just kill it with poison. I don’t understand the meaning of going through the effort to drown it. And why is the bone broken… Well, at any rate, you should be careful,” Sakurako-san says while looking sleep deprived. I nod.

It’s such a nice, clear morning, though. Perhaps she noticed my not-so-energetic expression, but gran decided to make potato, and pumpkin dango for breakfast. I decide to take my stalker, Hector, for a walk. By the time I get back, the warm scent of potatoes and pumpkin greets me.

Making dango is surprisingly physically demanding. I help mash up the potatoes, like I used to do when my grandma was still around. I crush them up with the pestle until they’re a smooth paste, then we add a bunch of potato starch to it. The pumpkin dango are basically the same, but with sugar added.

“If it’s your first time, you should wait for it to cool down first. It’s hard to get the right firmness when it’s still hot,” gran says.

Since gran is already experienced in the ways of making dango, she tosses everything together right away. They’re fluffy, sticky, and have a nostalgic scent. My grandma used to make these as a snack for me. This used to be a staple food when people were just starting to colonize Hokkaido, since there wasn’t enough food to go around. Once they’re completely covered in powder, gran puts the dango into the frying pan with oil. Since Sakurako-san doesn’t like eating oily food in the morning, gran makes soup from azuki beans. Rather than putting mochi and rice flour dumplings in the soup, she adds some of the potato and pumpkin dango. I have no reason to believe that it won’t taste great.

Apparently Sakurako-san never helps in the kitchen. Gran says that it’s only natural, since they’re supposed to be master and servant.

“You know, I learned to make these dango from the former lady of the house. Nadeshiko-ojousama used to be a great cook… It’s sad to think that this recipe will go to the grave with me,” Gran says while she cooks the dango.

They’re simple to make, but each family makes them slightly differently. Gran is the only one who knows how to make the Kujou family dango.

The mitarashi dango have light brown marks where they were cooked, and they're dripping with butter. I bite into one, even though it's still piping hot. They're springy and sweet. Even though I just witnessed a crow autopsy and I'm short on sleep, I still eat three plates of dango.

Whether it's dead or alive, it's scary to plunge a knife into an animal. Still, I was surprised by how little disgust I felt watching the dissection. Maybe it's easier if it's starting to decompose a bit. Of course I hate the scent of decay, but I don't think it's that bad anymore. The fact that the body changes after death is proof that it was alive before. If you think of it like that, it's not so bad. Maybe I've become a monster in the past year and a half.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing…"

I'm worried about going home by myself, so I let Sakurako-san drive me there. I wonder how much I've changed in the past year and a half? I don't think I can give an unbiased opinion on it. Even a homicidal maniac like Hanabusa can blend in with regular people.

"There'll always be a piece of me in you," Diavel shouts.

There'll always be something deep in my heart, under my ribs. That something is "anger" and "hatred." If someone hurts my loved ones, there may come a day when I have to wield a knife.

I told Utsumi-san about the crow, but he said there's nothing he can do about it as a police officer. Of course he'd say that. There hasn't been any real harm done yet. It's just one suspicious animal carcass. It would be a different story if it had been chopped up into bits, but it's hard to prove that there was any ill intent with just this.

"I don't want to be a nuisance to your family, but you could always invite me over for dinner sometime. Maybe they'll see a cop walking around and it'll keep them from doing anything else."

Sakurako-san also suggested that I could ask Utsumi-san to patrol the area. I ask my mom if it's okay to invite him for dinner, since I figured it would be fun on top of making me feel safer.

Last week was Utsumi-san's birthday, so Isozaki-sensei, Kougami, and the rest of us all had a party at his house one night. It was a make-your-own-sushi party. I had so much fun that I wasn't even sleepy. I'm tired from having so much fun, and from stressing over if anything bad would happen, but I can't sleep very well. Despite being exhausted, I laid in bed drifting between being asleep and being awake. Before I knew it, I'd fallen asleep. I wake up to the sound of the newspaper delivery person's scooter.

"Ugh, it's already morning…" I think to myself. I sit up and look at the orange sky through the gap in the curtains.

The other side of the curtains are yellow from the sunlight. It's pretty, but I remember Isozaki-sensei saying that a red sky in the morning means it'll rain. I'll probably need an umbrella this afternoon… Just as I'm thinking that, I see a person sprinting out of the yard.

"What?"

The figure quickly disappears down the street. I couldn't even register what I saw at first. I run as fast as I can to the entrance. It's a lot cooler than yesterday, and the air smells wet. I know just what to look for.

Sure enough, there's another crow corpse left behind. I run out of the yard just in time to see a white kei car turning the corner. There aren't many cars passing through the side roads in a residential area this early in the morning. They must have noticed me and made their escape. My instincts are telling me so. But if the criminal this time was Phantom, I don't think they would run away at the first sign of discovery like that. Maybe it was someone being controlled by Phantom? Or maybe this is completely unrelated.

"What happened? Did someone dump another animal corpse?"

My mom is waiting for me by the front door, wearing just her pajamas and a parka.

"Ah… Yeah."

The corpses before were from Wolf, though. It was her way of repaying me for taking care of her. Now I'm wondering if that was really the case. It's not like there's any way to prove it anymore.

"This must be some kind of prank."

"They used a car to escape, so they probably don't live in the neighbourhood… Probably."

That's the only saving grace here. This is a relatively new area, so there's lots of young couples and elderly people living here, and the neighbourhood association is pretty active. I'm glad it doesn't look like anyone I know from the neighbourhood is doing this.

"I see… Well, it could be anyone."

My mom hands me a garbage bag with a sour expression.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm no saint. Nobody is. Even I have grudges against certain people. I guess that kind of thing happens, even if you live in a nice area…" My mom sighs.

She decides to have some security cameras installed. I think it's a good idea. Even just having a camera there might be enough to deter them.

"I feel bad for being suspicious of our neighbours… Well, that's just the times we live in. There's no point in worrying about it."

My mom looks reluctant and defeated.

I'm surprised my mom just decided that "it can't be helped" rather than getting angry and hating the culprit. I think about it some more as I put the crow's corpse in the bag. What is the culprit going to do if they can't dump the corpse here because of the cameras? I start to feel scared, but I have to stay strong, for my mom's sake. If something happens, I have to protect my mom. Since my brother and dad aren't there to protect her, I'll have to step up to the plate.

I had to get up early to bring the crow to Sakurako-san's house, so I'm tired and feeling out of it at school all day. Frighteningly, I don't remember anything. All I remember is lunch break, then suddenly school is over. It's strange, there should have been a quiz in English today. Well, thanks to the rest I got during class, I'm completely recharged now that school is over. Azechi clumsily dropped her lunch box on the ground, so the other 3 of us split our food so she could have some, leaving all 4 of us still hungry.

“Let’s go get curry. I want cutlet curry.” Imai eats even more than I do, so he’s going to get an extra large portion.

I strongly agree with his opinion. I nod with all my strength.

“I had curry yesterday, though,” Azechi, the cause of our hunger, says shamelessly.

I have to resist the urge to tell her she doesn’t get to decide.

“Sorry, I’m eating dinner at home…” Kougami says timidly.

Imai, being a slave to love, immediately withdraws his statement and says, “let’s get something else instead, then.” I hate you, Imai.

“Oh, I want to try a grilled banana. I’ve never had one before.” Azechi suggests we head to the station while we decide where to eat.

I suggest getting jun dogs or hot dogs, but after Kougami says “I want taiyaki, too,” the decision is made, and we head to the old taiyaki shop. I could probably eat 10 of them right now.

The four of us walk down past the station, and each buy taiyaki and grilled bananas. I turn away from the shop so I can start eating, but Kougami grabs my belt. Just as I’m about to enjoy my warm, salty-sweet taiyaki and cold tea, I suddenly get pulled around and end up dropping my food. Before I can voice my complaints, Kougami brings herself right against me.

“K-Kougami?”

I can feel her trembling against my back. She’s soft and warm. I bet Imai is jealous.

“Tatewaki-kun, I keep seeing the same car pass by.”

Unfortunately, something serious is happening, so I can’t enjoy this moment.

“What?”

“I’ve seen it 3 times since the station. I even checked the license plate. I’m pretty sure we’re being followed.”

Imai and Azechi notice that something’s wrong, but Kougami says, “you two just keep walking like normal.” I guess it’s so our pursuer doesn’t realize we noticed them.

“Which car?” I ask, pretending to stay calm.

I feel really nervous, even without having Kougami pressed up against me.

“It’s a white kei-car.”

“…”

I should have realized it sooner. It’s not my whole family or my mom that’s being targeted, it’s me.

“You three should hurry back to the store. I think I’m the one they’re following.”

“We should stay in pairs. There’s no need to be a decoy,” Imai says, grabbing me by the wrist.

He doesn’t even know about Phantom, he just knows I’m in trouble. Even though it might put him in danger, he’s still willing to help. Maybe he just wants to get Kougami out of danger as soon as possible.

“A decoy? Are you dumb? Wouldn’t it be unnatural if the 4 of us don’t go in the store together? It’d be better to call the police or a taxi,” Azechi says.

She doesn’t know the full extent of the situation, so she’s able to give a solid, reasonable opinion.

“Why don’t we go up a one-way street first to see if we can lose them?” Kougami looks at the road to her right.

I have to make a decision before the car turns around again. We may get caught by our pursuer before we get back to the taiyaki shop. Fortunately, there's a lot of one-way streets here. We turn down the street with the old dry cleaner and the Buddhist ritual supply shop, and get to the side street just off of Nijoudoori where we slip into the narrow space between some office buildings. It's about halfway between the taiyaki shop and the station. Several different options, such as if it'd be better to escape through the station, run through my mind. Since we managed to hide, it's hard to leave this spot. We're crouching close enough to be hidden by the corners. Seeing Azechi, who looks either anxious or bored, holding her knee with one arm and her phone with the other makes me feel guilty for getting the three of them involved. However, at the same time, it's reassuring to not be alone. If Kougami hadn't noticed it, I don't know what would have happened.

"The driver was a woman. I think she was on the older side," Kougami mumbles.

I had no idea it was a woman. I check my email, but Phantom hasn't contacted me. Although, Hitoe did say that Hanabusa was as beautiful as a woman. I shouldn't have been so careless. After we had been there for almost 20 minutes, the people in the office started giving us suspicious looks, so we start heading toward the taiyaki shop. On the way we call a taxi and go straight to Utsumi-san's police box, but in the end, he can't do anything just because we were being followed by a suspicious vehicle.

"I can't do anything until something has actually happened. I can't arrest someone just because they might be a bad guy," Utsumi-san explains apologetically.

He says he can at least take down the car model and number, but Kougami doesn't know much about cars, and she can only remember that the last two digits of the license plate were 05. Kougami apologizes, and looks really guilty. For now, I decide to wait for some evidence to appear on the security camera I installed. Apparently they'll be increasing patrols in the neighbourhood. I ask my mountain grandpa to pick up Kougami and the others with his car.

I tell my mom that one of my friends was sick and couldn't get home on their own, which is why I'll be getting home late. Using that excuse, I can visit Sakurako-san. I got an email earlier with the results of this morning's crow autopsy. It's not like I'm trying to go there to hide or anything. Well, it is a safe place for me.

Hector greets me with his usual enthusiasm, and gran asks if I'd like to stay for dinner. I politely decline, then head in to speak with Sakurako-san. Seeing her in her usual chair, looking bored, makes my anxiety and fear melt away in an instant.

"The police can't do anything about it. They can't tell if you're lying or not, after all. Since there isn't always one single truth, they can't do anything unless something happens right in front of them. You shouldn't blame poor Utsumi," Sakurako-san says after I explain how the police wouldn't protect me earlier.

"I wasn't trying to blame him…"

I don't know about killing animals for fun, but is it really not illegal to chase a group of minors with your car?

"I've been thinking for a while about these crows. Both are carrion crows of different genders, but they both died from drowning. They also both have a broken wing."

So they were both killed the same way?

“But there aren’t any major wounds. I’m curious about where these crows came from. How did they catch them, for example? Crows are clever, and it’s not that simple to catch a wild bird.”

“You’re right… And they had died relatively recently.”

Apparently hunters occasionally catch crows in their snares, but those would leave wounds on the bird’s leg.

“It seems to imply that they had their wings broken after being caught unharmed. It may also be a hint to how they managed to capture the birds without leaving any traces.”

“Could they… Have been shot with an airsoft gun?”

My older brother loves airsoft, so I heard from him before that airsoft guns aren’t lethal, but can cause quite a bit of damage to animals. Maybe it couldn’t kill a crow, but it could probably kill something the size of a sparrow. They can be modified to be more powerful, too.

“I thought of that, too, but I couldn’t find any signs of the crows being hit by airsoft pellets.”

“Wouldn’t they have aimed for the wings? Maybe the wings broke when they got hit by the pellet.”

“I could understand if it were a small song bird, but is it possible with something as big as a crow? At least there’s no gunshot wound. If it were strong enough to break the crow’s wing, it should have left traces on the surrounding skin.”

I remember when my brother accidentally shot himself with an airsoft gun while cleaning it. It left a fairly large, round injury with a lot of bruising.

“I’ve also heard of using cage traps to get rid of birds that are causing problems…”

Even though they’re pests, crows are still wild birds. Even if they had a way to catch them, why did they pick *crows* out of all animals.

“'I want to kill the crows of the Three Thousand Worlds, and sleep with you in the morning'… It’s a dodoitsu poem.”

I’m pretty sure it was written by Shinsaku Takasugi. Crows often appear in stories like that. I wonder if it’s because everyone is familiar with them.

“You know quite the romantic poem, young master,” Gran, who already prepared barley tea before I even noticed, says surprisingly.

“It means he wants to kill all the noisy crows in the world so he can sleep next to his lover at his leisure. I kind of liked the way it sounded for some reason, so I remembered it.”

It really is a romantic poem. He just wants all the noise in the world to stop so he can quietly spend time with the person he loves most. It’s not a sad poem.

“No, that’s a little off. The poem has a verse that goes ‘every time I write a vow, three birds die in Kamano.’ There’s a legend in Kumano that crows are messengers for the gods, and supposedly if you break a promise, three crows will die and you’ll be punished.”

Messengers for the gods… It reminds me of the Yatagarasu story Sawa-san told me.

“Basically this poem is saying that the author is willing to break the rules and face punishment if it means being with their beloved. The messengers are also supposed to bring dawn, so it would mean living in an eternal night… That’s what this poem means.”

A lonely, eternal night… I feel sorry for the poor birds now.

“At any rate, there must be some reason why this person keeps killing crows. Maybe it’s some sort of message, or it’s supposed to mean something.”

Sakurako-san suggests we investigate this further. The security camera is supposed to be installed tomorrow, so that'll provide at least some help. I feel anxiety start welling up in my chest, but seeing the crow's corpse helps calm me down a bit. That's right, it's a crow. It's not a butterfly this time.

Sakurako-san drives me most of the way back to my house. I glance over at her while we're in the car, which reminds me of the story from earlier. A story of a man driven mad after a crow appears before him after losing his beloved. It was a story by Edgar Allen Poe. I'm not a fan of Poe's works, since they're always about death. It's a little different from Sakurako-san, who focuses on death as well as life. She sees the beauty in both life and death. Her reality only consists of bone-white truths. She never utters a single word of romanticism. But I think I'm heading in the same direction as Poe. I can't calmly accept the facts. If I lost Sakurako-san, for example, I think I'd go insane as well.

"I… Want to get my driver's license as soon as I can."

Then Sakurako-san wouldn't have to drive me home on nights like this. I'm always worried about making her drive back home alone after she drops me off.

"Really? Apparently less people are learning to drive these days, but I'd recommend getting a car if you plan to keep living in Hokkaido. If you have a rotting animal carcass on your person, taxis won't pick you up."

"I don't think I'd drive with a rotting corpse in my car, though."

Sakurako-san suddenly laughs. "You really think so?" She says.

I probably won't. Well… If I do, it'll only be on rare occasions.

"Once I get my license, do you want to be the first person I take for a drive?"

Sakurako-san laughs at me, even though it took all my courage to ask.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing… It's just strange to think you're almost old enough to drive. When we first met, you were so small and innocent that I almost thought you were an elementary schooler."

"You're exaggerating, right?!"

How rude! I was already a middle schooler when we first met. As expected, she keeps laughing at me. She always looks so happy when she smiles that it makes my anger just melt away.

"You must have been born in March. You can start going to driving school two months before you turn 18, even if you don't take the exam right away. It might be better to do that after you graduate high school… Well, two years is a long way off, so I'll just enjoy looking forward to it for now."

Is that her awkward way of saying yes to my invitation? "It's a promise, then," I say happily.

But I suddenly have a feeling that I can't fulfill this promise. I don't know why. It's just a vague hunch, but it felt so real for a second. At this point, I'm already aware that I'll have to part with her sooner or later. Nothing stays the same forever. Even skeletons deteriorate. I can't kill the birds of The Three Thousand Worlds.

Part 4

When I get home, I find that my mom has been waiting anxiously.

"You know Azechi, that transfer student? She didn't look like she was feeling well."

My mom, who is just finishing making dinner, gives me a puzzled expression. Azechi was here to return a lunch box that I lent her. My mom looks a little concerned that Azechi always looks so pale. I think it's just her makeup, though.

"The security camera will be installed tomorrow. But you know, I think it's just a cat or something."

"Yeah, probably."

I try to tell her about the suspicious car, but I end up not being able to say it, so I just agree. I don't want to worry my mom, so for now I just get ready for dinner. I sent my older brother an email a while ago, but he never responded for some reason. I asked my mom about it, but she just said he's probably busy. After dinner, I have a bath then head straight to bed. I've been feeling sleep deprived lately, and I want to be up early and alert tomorrow. The suspicious person is an early riser.

I wake up before dawn to keep an eye on the yard, but nobody shows up. I'm both disappointed and relieved. As my mom said, it could always be a cat that's doing this. Maybe I was just mistaken about the car from before. White kei cars are pretty common, so the car from yesterday might have just been lost. I don't want to think of the worst case scenario. Against my better judgment, I try to convince myself that it might just all be a coincidence.

Still, Sakurako-san determined that the crows died from drowning. Maybe a cat just picked up a crow that fell in the river. I spend my day as normal, trying to think of this situation positively. I stayed cautious on my way to and from school today, but I didn't notice anyone following me. I also met Utsumi-san twice while he was patrolling. He said he was looking out for me with a wink. My feeling of safety has been stolen from me. I'm still just a normal high school student. I don't think the only truths are those left by bones and corpses.

After dinner, I head to the convenience store nearby. I still have homework to do, but I ran out of lead for my mechanical pencil. I have a regular pencil and an erasable ballpoint pen at home, but I just can't get used to writing with anything else. It's pretty hot tonight, so I want to get a sports drink and some ice cream. My desire for those drowns out the voice in my head telling me to stay home. I'm sure it'll be fine. It's not too far, and I can take a detour that takes me along a more populated street that passes a police box. My mom told me to go, since she wanted me to pick up eggs while I'm out. I don't feel too scared, so I head out to the convenience store with no problems.

Asahikawa is a medium sized city, but it still has a countryside feel to it. I look up at the sky, and I can see the stars shining bright. There aren't many clouds, and it's almost a new moon, so I can see lots of them tonight. I find Deneb from the Milky Way, then find Cygnus from that. I can see Vega and Altair to the south. Libra is down low to the horizon. It's the perfect summer sky.

I arrive at the convenience store after my short walk. I pick up my pencil lead, some ice cream treats, and several drinks, including a new one that Azechi really liked. I'm starting to feel hungry, so I grab some castellas for a snack. It's dangerously sweet if you eat it with milk coffee. I check my watch. It's almost 9pm. I want to browse some more, but I should hurry home. I quickly buy some eggs before I leave. Before I even noticed, the sky got cloudy.

I walk while checking the text I just got from Imai. It seems like he's having a tough time with the math homework. I'm better at math than him. I'm so absorbed by my phone that I didn't notice the sound of a car approaching. Their high beams are dazzlingly bright. How annoying. I can't even see my phone screen.

"…Ah!"

Suddenly I hear the sound of the car accelerating. I'm immediately pulled back to reality, and instinctively hide behind a utility pole on the side of the road. The car speeds past. A white kei car. Before I knew it I'd walked past the wide, busy road, and am now on a side street in a residential area near my house. The car stops a few meters ahead of me, then starts backing up quickly. I look over and make eye contact with the driver. It's a woman who is about 30-40 years old.

"Kh!"

Her eyes are filled with anger. It feels like if she had backed into me and killed me, she wouldn't have cared. Or rather, like she hopes that would happen. I'm sure of it. The kei car furiously turns back. The moment she overtakes me and tries to turn around, I keep my back to the utility pole and turn to throw my package of eggs at her windshield. The impact causes the eggs to break and spill everywhere. The woman looks surprised, and turns on the wipers. The package gets caught on the wiper, and causes the sticky egg mixture to spread all over the window.

"Why the hell did you do that?!" The woman shouts, flustered.

She rolls down the passenger side window. Her grey, disheveled bangs are illuminated by the streetlight. I tremble with fear.

"Did you forget about September 14th?!" The woman shouts.

Her mouth is foaming. Just then, we notice how loud we're being. The outside light on the house across the street turn on, indicating that someone is about to come out of the house.

"I'll never forgive you or your parents," she threatens me in a low voice, then violently speeds off again.

I fall to my knees on the ground, which smells like a damp egg. There's still some clumps of soil where the tires were. My water bottle clangs as it rolls out of the shopping bag I dropped. I don't have the energy to pick it up right away.

"What happened?" An old man that came out of the house asks me, worried.

"Ah, nothing. Just… I almost got hit."

"Is that why she was mad? It's terrible to drive so fast on such a narrow road," The kind old man says angrily.

He asks if I'm going to report the car to the police. I shake my head.

"No… It's my fault for looking at my phone while walking, too."

"I guess so. Besides, children shouldn't be walking around at this time of night. Can you stand up?"

"Yeah. I'm fine, really. Thank you very much."

I thank the old man for picking up the things I dropped, then stand up. He asks if he should walk me home. I'm grateful, but politely decline. I just want to be alone right now. I'm scared, but I don't want to tell anyone. I hurry back home, and tell my mom I forgot the eggs. She laughs and forgives me. I'm relieved.

I can't tell my mom about what happened on the way home. After all, what would I even say? That woman said she wouldn't forgive me or my parents. She was so full of rage. I don't want my mom to worry, so I can't tell her. I definitely can't tell her.

September 14th. It's the saddest day of the year for both of us. It's the anniversary of the day my dad, Shinichi Tatewaki, died.

Part 5

I haven't talked to my mom much about my dad's death. It's hard to bring it up, and she always looks so sad when something reminds her of him. My dad died when I was still little, so I only remember what he looked like from seeing pictures. I've overheard some things my grandpa has about him, but even as a kid, I knew I shouldn't ask about him.

When I was in kindergarten, I loved tokusatsu heroes. I always liked thinking that my dad was a superhero like that. I thought my favourite hero looked a bit like my dad. So to me, I got to see my dad every Sunday morning. That's why I kept watching the show on DVD all the time, long after it finished airing.

But now that I'm in high school, I know my dad wasn't a superhero. He didn't go off and leave me to save the world. He won't come back after defeating all the bad guys, even if I behave myself.

My mom just got out of the bath, so I have to muster all my courage to talk to her about him. I have to ask about my dad's death. My mom takes a sip of beer and says, "it was a nice day."

My dad died on one of his beloved bikes, on a sunny day like it was today. It was a subarachnoid hemorrhage.

"But he held on for about 5 days after the accident. I couldn't even talk to him… Even though we were married. He never woke up, so I couldn't say goodbye. I entrusted you and your brother to your grandparents for a while."

My mom's voice is becoming hoarse, so I try to quickly end the conversation. There's more I want to know, but I can't bring myself to ask her about it right now. She lost her husband just 5 years after they got married. My mom is still single to this day because she still thinks of him as her partner. My mom still cries when she thinks about my dad, so I don't think there were any problems with him cheating or anything like that. So why is there a woman who hates us because of something relating to the day he died? Maybe my dad really wasn't a hero. But there's a reason for everything. Up until now, that woman hasn't caused us any harm. As far as I know, at least.

I was worried after what happened yesterday, but there was no attack this morning. The security camera has been installed, so it should start recording if it detects motion. But what if there was some kind of trouble between that woman and my dad? Or with my mom. I don't know why we're suddenly being targeted, the anniversary of his death isn't for 2 more months. After school the next day, I head straight for Sakurako-san's house. As she would put it, "the bones aren't connecting."

“It’s not necessarily about your father. Check if there’s any articles about events that happened on that day,” Sakurako-san says, and opens the Hokkaido newspaper database.

It seems that you can see all their articles since July of 1988, including the local papers. You have to pay a fee, but the data is accurate, and it's useful for looking up even smaller articles. We search for the days around September 14th from over the last decade. There’s an article from 2 years ago about heavy rain causing a landslide that killed several people, and a few about car accidents, but nothing that seems right. On the same day and year that my father died, a man in his late 20s died in a motorcycle accident in Biei. It only involved one person, so it probably isn’t relevant.

“There was a fire in the city 7 years ago that killed a father and his child. Do you remember that?”

I think about that date. When I count backwards, I must have been in my 4th year of elementary school.

“Ah.”

“What?”

“Nothing… It’s not about the fire, I just remembered something about that day. After the memorial service, everyone went to a hot spring. I wasn’t in Asahikawa that day.”

I clearly remember taking a break from school and going to a hot spring with all my grandparents. My mom was there too, of course. She couldn’t have been involved in the fire.

“The fire was in a detached house, right? Then it shouldn’t be a real estate issue. My mom only handles apartments and condos.”

Yeah, the more I think about it, the more it seems strange for someone to hate my mom.

“I have a hard time imagining that my dad did something that would cause someone to hate my whole family. Same goes for my mom.”

Maybe that’s just what I want to think. I don’t want to think that my mom might have hurt someone.

“If we lived in a world where nobody resented good people, Martin Luther King wouldn’t have been killed. You don’t have to doubt your parents just because someone is out to get you.” Sakurako-san says quietly, clearly trying to calm me down.

She leans back in her chair, and assumed her normal “thinking pose.” Hector, who was sleeping before, gets up and nuzzles against Sakurako-san’s thighs. I have to avert my gaze.

“If you start thinking too deeply, you’ll be stuck like that forever. Anyway, young master, I’ll pay you if you help me clean the storage shed in the back garden,” Gran says with a smile.

Is she just going to pretend like she wasn’t eavesdropping on our entire conversation? She gently pats me on the back. I’m more than happy to help out, even without being paid, since gran always treats me like family. I know she’s just seeing me as Soutarou-kun, though.

“Then I’d rather have apple pie than money! With ice cream!”

“Oh, really? Alright, then.” Gran looks even happier than before.

I notice Sakurako-san scowling for a moment. She grabs my arm.

“I like gran’s apple pie, too,” I say to her quietly.

Gran’s apple pie was Soutarou-kun’s favourite food.

The three of us head to the garden, and open up the storage shed. It’s more like a small warehouse made of brick than a shed, though. The inside is full of expensive-looking jars,

paintings, and storage chests, all covered in dust. Right at the front of the shed is a relatively new snow shovel.

"Oh right, I bought that for this coming winter."

I pick up the shovel, and notice the handle is already starting to rust. It's light, but it feels sturdy.

"I wonder what's in this metal drum?" Gran points at a big metal drum, big enough to even bathe in.

"Don't worry about it, it's just a tool of the trade," Sakurako-san says sternly.

"If you need something like this for your 'trade,' it'd be nice if you brought in some money. Aren't you relying just on your pocket money right now?"

Apparently even if you sell skeletal specimens, it still doesn't really bring in much money. Well, not many people want bones. Sakurako-san has a dissatisfied look on her face.

"Why don't you two at least go to a hot spring some time? Go to Sounkyou as Sakurako's treat."

Asahidake has beautiful stars in the summer, and Tenninkyou has that traditional hot spring feeling.

"What happens if we run into each other when we're heading to the bath?" Sakurako-san looks suspicious.

Gran sighs.

"Then how about Tokachigawa hot spring, since it's nearby. I have relatives in Obihiro, and the moor hot spring there feels great. If you go a little further to Ashoro, there's an entire whale specimen there."

Akan lake and Onneto lake are nice, too. Akan is fun in the winter because you can fish for pond smelt. Last time I went there was with my maternal grandma.

"I see, a whale specimen would be nice. I've heard about it." Sakurako-san doesn't seem entirely convinced.

"That's right. You should spend a little more time with me while I'm still around, anyway," gran says, grinning.

Yeah, it's better to go while she's still so energetic. Soon it'll be too late, and they'll regret it. Sakurako-san has taught me the most that time is finite.

"In that case, you should come too, boy. I've been on several trips with gran, and she's not very good at relaxing. She gets bored and cranky when she just sits around doing nothing."

"I'm fine with it, but doesn't she just get bored because you don't bother talking to her?"

Actually, now that I think about it, I can't really imagine the two of them chatting the day away at an inn.

"When she was still a child, we used to make origami together… Hey, Hector! Get out of there!"

Since we're all cleaning the storage shed together, Hector has decided to dig around too. He seems to be pulling a trapezoid shaped cage out of the clutter. Sakurako-san quickly takes it away from him, and offers a rubber ball instead.

"This is an old mouse trap. We don't have many mice in here anymore, though. The young lady hates them. We can probably get rid of this old thing."

"You hate mouse traps? Not mice themselves?"

Sakurako-san tosses Hector's ball so he gets out of the way. Hector is completely focused on his ball, so he chases after it. Sakurako-san looks down at the dirty mouse trap in disgust.

"The mice die after they're caught. I find it unpleasant to hear their shrieks before they die," Sakurako-san says sadly.

"But people can't just let them all go, or they'll get into someone else's home. It was more common in the past, but…" Gran says. It might sound cruel, but it's the unfortunate truth.

I guess there's no avoiding it when mice are seen as nothing more than pests that carry diseases. Of course Sakurako-san would hate something that's only used to kill living creatures. Once something dies, its body becomes a "thing." It's horrible and cruel for a creature to have its life suddenly taken away.

"Sakurako-san…"

I can't think of the right words to say to her. Sakurako-san has a strangely passionate expression on her face for a discussion about mouse traps.

"Sakurako-san?"

"…I see."

"Huh?"

"Boy, go home before it gets dark today. I'll get in touch with you later!"

"What?"

Sakurako-san suddenly rushes out of the shed, leaving gran and I looking at each other in confusion.

"I guess I'll head home, then…"

Hector looks at gran and I like he's asking, "aren't you coming too?" before running after Sakurako-san.

"…Well, the mess in here isn't going anywhere." Gran sighs.

If the head of the family wants me to go home, it would be rude for me to stay. I'll have to accept my apple pie reward another time. I help gran close up the storage shed, say goodbye, and leave.

Part 6

I remember the note from Aoba-san that mentioned upholding the dignity of life. Listening to the voices of the deceased is an unusual job, but they always tell the truth. Even if we make mistakes in interpreting them, the deceased will never lie, and will keep repeating the truth as many times as it takes. There's only one chance to perform an autopsy in order to hear all the corpse has to say. The corpse changes over time. Immediately after the autopsy, they're returned to their family, turned to ash, and buried. The bones can tell you a lot, but there's much you can't learn from them. If you don't pick up everything the corpse has to say in one go, it'll be lost forever. It's the last chance to protect the dignity of their life. Sakurako-san knows that well. An autopsy is a conversation. It's the final opportunity to listen to the body's story before it turns to silent bone.

The morning after my visit with the Kujou family, I get up extra early. I know there's a security camera now, but I'd rather stay up and watch for the intruder than wait to see the

footage. They're more like an attacker than an intruder. It was raining a bit yesterday, but it's clear this morning. If they're going to show up, today would be the day to do it. Well, it would be better if they didn't come at all. I can't forgive them for killing animals.

It's still dark outside, and far too early to even call it morning, but I can see headlights approaching the house. I quickly get changed and hold my breath. I gently pull back the curtain and peek outside. I see a woman get out of the car, pull something heavy out of a plastic bag, and place it on the pavement. The person looks around to make sure nobody is around, still within the sight line of the security camera. Unfortunately for her, I'm not letting her escape that easily. I rush down the stairs and slam the door open. The woman tries to run away, but it's too late.

"Hold on, could I talk to you for a minute? Have you heard of the wildlife protection act?" Utsumi-san is standing in front of her. "It's against the law to capture and kill wild animals without permission. You're also not allowed to dump dead animals on another person's property."

Utsumi-san calls for his backup, who were hiding in the parking spot of the house across the street (with permission, of course.)

I thought the woman looked to be around 40, but now that the sun is starting to come out, she looks a bit younger than that. Her white hair keeps her from looking as young as she is. She's biting her lower lip.

Sakurako-san walks past both of them, pulls out a plastic bag, and couches on the pavement.

"A Japanese hare."

Today, it's a rabbit rather than a crow.

"Gran used to drown the mice that she caught in the mousetraps, since she didn't want to harm them herself. She's a kind woman, but… I don't agree with drowning an animal in a bucket or a river. I hated it so much that I would always try to release them."

She puts the rabbit in her bag, and looks up at the sky. There's a crow on the roof of the house.

"I've been thinking about how you were catching those crows and killing them. Why did you drown them? Why break their bones? I asked Sawa-san about it. He said maybe you were killing them because they're pests. He suggested rather than hunting the crows, you trapped them in some sort of cage."

A cage? I remember the mouse trap from yesterday.

"You probably used a medium sized trap, like one used to catch tanuki. It's surprising, considering how smart and cautious crows are, but you used that intelligence against them. They know how to avoid traps, but they can also learn to steal the bait and manage to escape the trap… Until you rig it so they can't get out."

The woman trembles in fear. Her eyes are bloodshot, and she has this empty stare.

"You threw the trap into the water. Their wings were broken from them desperately, frantically trying to escape. They wanted to live, even if they had to break their own wings. Is that right?" Sakurako-san says, sounding disgusted.

The woman doesn't deny it. She isn't saying anything, as if she wasn't even listening. Sakurako-san continues her explanation.

“The trap wasn’t originally set up for catching crows. The cage would look out of place in a residential area, so you must have set it up in a place where nobody would question it. In other words, you set it up in a spot where people would be struggling with pests. Based on the contents of the crows’ stomachs and the dirt on your tires, you must live on some type of farm, right? Sakurako-san says, then briskly walks over to stand in front of the woman and holds out the bag with the rabbit in it. “What is your relationship with this family?” Sakurako-san asks in a low voice. The woman trembles, and lets out a small shriek.

“I d-don’t have any connection to them.”

The woman doesn’t take the rabbit, letting it fall to the ground. Sakurako-san picks it up to hold it out for her again, but Utsumi-san steps in this time.

“Now, now. I’m sure there’s a lot of circumstances around this, but there’s a lot of pedestrian traffic around here, so I’d like to hear what you have to say at the police station. We’ve spent long enough standing in front of someone else’s home.” Utsumi-san steps between the two of them and speaks to the woman with authority.

He has a strangely powerful expression. However, as soon as she hears the words “police station” the woman starts glaring at Utsumi-san. It’s true we should get out of here soon, though. Before my mom notices.

“Fumi-chan?!”

Too late, we were noticed. My mom is standing in the doorway.

“Mom!”

No, I guess it’s only natural after all the noise we were making. Still, I want to keep this woman away from my mom. I don’t even want them to see each other.

My mom mumbles, “why are you here?” before rushing over.

“You know each other?”

“Yeah, we’re old acquaintances. She’s the wife of your dad’s friend…”

“You traitor! Filthy liar!” The woman starts shouting, pointing at my mom.

“Liar…?” My mom looks bewildered.

The woman lunges for my mom, but Utsumi-san pins her arms behind her back and stops her.

“Is this about the incident in Biei?” My mom asks while Sakurako-san stands in front of her to protect her.

“Huh?”

“Boy, didn’t you say there was another incident on the day your father died?”

My dad was in a good mood that day since he loved motorcycles and the weather was nice.

“On the same day Boy’s father died, a young man was killed in an accident in Biei. Could he have been that woman’s husband?”

My mom’s expression distorts into one of pain. She gives a small nod.

“So what? Why is that…”

“Why? Because Tomoe-san said she’d never get remarried,” the woman called Fumi-chan forces the words out from the back of her throat. Soon after, she crumbles to the ground.

The sky is getting brighter. It’s a beautiful, orange morning.

On the same day my dad died, Fumi-san's husband, Atsushi-san, also passed away in a bike accident. Although they were different ages, the two of them met at a touring point and hit it off. Since my dad saw his younger brother in Atsushi-san, he and his wife often came to visit at my family's house. It's heartbreaking that two biking buddies would die on the same day like that. Fumi-san, unlike my mom, had just gotten married and had no children, so she was all alone. My mom was feeling the same pain, and was very worried about Fumi-san, but it was hard for her since my brother and I were still so small. My mom was desperate to stay strong for my brother and I, while Fumi-san isolated herself. Eventually, the two grew apart and fell out of contact.

"I was worried, but I couldn't just keep hiding from reality with you."

"I guess so, since you have it all, unlike me. We're not the same. When Atsushi died, I lost everything!"

Fumi-san steps a bit closer to my mom. Utsumi-san holds her back, but she seems like she could lunge at my mom at any moment.

"I don't think it's the same. Sure, I had children, but it meant I couldn't just move around."

"So you're saying I was being weak and just sitting around crying all the time?! You're even more heartless than I thought!"

"It's not a contest of who had it worse!"

Fumi-san is trembling with anger. Her screams sound like she's on the verge of tears. My mom stays calm as she confronts her.

"Why?! Why do you have everything?! Why am I the only one left suffering?! It's like you've taken all the happiness, leaving nothing for me! I even had to watch both my parents die right in front of me!"

"Right, I remember that you took over the family farm so you could take care of your parents… Well, I guess I'm blessed compared to you, but I did nothing to deprive you of your own happiness. I just decided to be a happier person. Why do you want to make me suffer, just because you are?"

My mom slowly shakes her head. I know she's trying her best to stay calm. On one hand, it's hard for me to agree with what my mom said, but on the other hand, this lady murdered innocent animals. I'm so upset that I don't know what to do right now.

"But I'm sorry… I should have thought about you more."

"Why would you? You're heartless, and I'm just a pathetic waste of space compared to you."

"You're right, I am heartless. I could never be as devoted as you. If you want to get mad at me, say it to my face. Don't beat around the bush by harassing me and my family like this."

I can tell my mom is trying really hard to keep her anger in check. If she gets too emotional, she'll lose. I should try to calm her down… But my mom briefly glances at me, and I can tell that look means "shut up." I'll just hold my tongue for now.

"I hated you."

"I never hated you, so I'm sorry that I didn't notice."

"Quit trying to act like you've done nothing wrong! You're a liar and a thief! You can take responsibility by killing yourself!" Fumi-san shouts with such force that it messes up her hair.

Even though she should be around 10 years younger than my mom, she looks much older seeing her like this.

“Fumi-chan…” My mom’s expression twists, like she’s about to cry. She’s not used to facing so much anger and hatred.

“That’s enough. You don’t have to apologize.” Sakurako-san walks up to my mom.

“I know, but…”

“She won’t be convinced by any apology you could make. She just wants you to be as miserable as she is. Her anger is the real deal. You can’t solve this with just words,” Sakurako-san chokes out.

“…”

My mom looks down at the ground. Taking that as confirmation, Sakurako-san grabs my shoulder and pushes me towards my mom.

“Mom…”

My mom still looks confused. I grab her shoulders, then move her toward the front door so she can escape into the house if the need arises. Sakurako-san glares at Fumi-san in my mom’s stead.

“Why do you hate her so much? Because of your similar circumstances? Because you couldn’t grasp your own circumstances? Your husband died on his own. And how is the fact that your parents passed away their problem?”

Fumi-san had no choice but to work at her parents’ farm and care for her ill parents after her mom pulled the “we raised you” card. She could have had a perfectly normal life under slightly different circumstances. My heart hurts.

“That’s right! Atsushi died alone without anyone noticing or helping him! I couldn’t even say goodbye! Are you saying that’s my fault? Is it my fault my parents got sick?!”

“All I’m saying is that regardless of whether it’s your fault or not, it has nothing to do with Tomoe Tatewaki.”

Fumi-san’s eyes are burning with rage. “If her husband hadn’t been sick, they would have ridden together like always! Then Atsushi might not have died!”

“That’s a completely unjustified reason to hate someone.” Sakurako-san scoffs at Fumi-san.

Why is she so good at provoking other people?

“I do sympathize with your situation, but I can’t agree with your twisted way of thinking. There’s just one thing I’d like to ask. Why do you think your husband wouldn’t have died if he hadn’t been alone?”

“…I just wish he hadn’t been alone… Then someone else could have seen who killed him…”

“Why do you think that?” Utsumi-san asks.

“There was only one set of skid marks. The police said that it was the only vehicle in the accident, but I’m not so sure that’s true. It was a road he’d travelled down countless times, and the weather was fine. How could they try to convince me that he fell all on his own?”

Utsumi-san’s expression turns grim.

“Even Atsushi-kun’s friends thought something wasn’t right. I tried to tell the police, but they just said they couldn’t have an autopsy done unless there was evidence of an actual crime. I started to feel like it was my fault he died…”

Fumi-san starts to cry hysterically. Utsumi-san tries to pat her back, but she brushes him off. She must really hate police officers.

"There might have been someone who murdered Atsushi-kun and escaped, but I'll never find out who did it. Everyone else just said they felt bad for me when I tried to ask for help. Nobody was on my side, everyone turned against me… It's like they were trying to discourage me."

Anyone she met could have been the person who killed her husband. They might want to kill her next. Fumi-san believes that so strongly that she started secluding herself in her house out of fear. Her dad was sick, and her mom was handicapped. There was no escape from her hardships. Sakurako-san looks at Fumi-san calmly, while Fumi-san desperately explains herself.

"I can see that you're so upset about how your husband's death was handled that you're obsessing over it, but why go after this family? This kid did nothing wrong." Sakurako-san points at me.

Fumi-san looks enraged. "You traitor!"

"What did my mom ever do to you?!"

"Are you really going to play dumb?! This is about her getting remarried!"

"What?"

Everyone looks at my mom in surprise at the mention of remarriage. Of course, my mom shakes her head. She looks the most surprised out of all of us.

"Eventually, the signs asking for witnesses faded, nobody brought flowers on the anniversary of his death, and my heart grew colder. I became a shut in, spending all my time tending the fields. My dad eventually died of dementia, so it was just me taking care of my elderly mom… Then one day, I saw you." Fumi-san is staring daggers at my mom.

Utsumi-san pins her arms behind her back.

"You were at the mall by the station. You were happily carrying your bags, walking with your child and new, younger husband."

Nobody has any idea what she's talking about. My mom and I look at each other in confusion, then both realize the misunderstanding at the same moment.

"No, no! You misunderstood! My mom didn't get remarried!"

"Shut up! You said you'd never get married again after your husband died, but now all you care about is your own happiness! Did you already forget about Shinichi-san?! Even if you're not married yet, I'll never forgive you for dating someone again. You disgust me!"

Personally, it disgusts me how much she cares about this misunderstanding. She really took everything the wrong way. That must have been the day I met up with Aoba-san at the mall. Sure, Aoba-san always acts way too familiar with everyone. He even pats me on the head like we're friends or something. I guess anyone who saw that would think we're father and son, hanging out on our day off. Still, that doesn't mean she can fly into a blind rage like this.

"Is that why you killed those crows? As a declaration of war or something?"

"I wanted Tomoe-san to know I wouldn't forgive her for being happy again!" Fumi-san's voice is shaking.

But even crows have families…

"The same day that I saw Tomoe-san at the mall… There was a crow stuck in the trap I was using to catch the raccoon digging in my fields. It was the third time, but I didn't let it go this

time. I killed it in a fit of rage. I put it in a container and slowly filled it with water. I really made it suffer! Serves it right!" Fumi-san yells.

My mom looks at her with complete hatred. As Sakurako-san said, it sounds like she drowned the crow alive.

"There were always two crows hanging around my house. Maybe they were a breeding pair. I started to feel better after dumping the drowned crow at Tomoe-san's house. I caught another crow the next day, so I killed it and disposed of it the same way. After that, a lot of crows started gathering around my house. They started destroying my fields, like they were getting revenge against me for killing their friend. They even killed the cute little newborn kittens in my barn…" Her anger quickly changes to laughter. "But then I realized that even crows take revenge on someone for killing their family members. Until then, I'd only been focusing on how much pain I was in. I should get revenge on the woman who stole my happiness from me. I could take away everything precious to her, and make her suffer!"

It's horrifying how jealous and spiteful she is. What used to be sadness has been slowly turning into insanity for the past decade or so.

Sakurako-san starts laughing out loud at her.

"What's so funny?!"

"I just thought it was funny that you don't understand. I'll tell you something. The crows weren't getting revenge on you."

"That's not true! They really did…"

Sakurako-san is laughing like she heard a hilarious joke, provoking Fumi-san's anger even more.

"No, they didn't come for revenge. It's something much simpler. It's still because you killed a crow, though." Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head.

I wonder why she makes such irritating gestures sometimes.

"Listen up, okay? Crows keep a careful watch on their territory where they raise chicks. They don't allow intruders. Even though you provoked them, they still guarded your house from other crows, as they wanted to keep themselves safe. Since the crows that lived there died, they lost their territory and other crows could freely fly around near your house again. They may even compete to make it into a new crow's territory again."

"…Huh?"

"Crows don't take revenge. They're just fending off outsiders to protect their territory, and by extension, their children. They may make loud noises to inform their friends of danger, or to share food with them, but they wouldn't put themselves in danger."

Sakurako-san is speaking in a tone as if Fumi-san is an idiot. She laughs loudly at the end, causing Fumi-san to lunge toward her, but Utsumi-san stops her again. Soon, I see the lights of police cars getting closer.

"…"

Fumi-san claws at the ground, trembling with rage. Her nails are neatly trimmed and unpainted, like my mom's. Sakurako-san slowly walks over and takes Fumi-san's hand.

"And what you did is not revenge. It's just shifting the blame and venting your anger. No matter how many crows you kill, or how much you hurt this family, it won't heal your pain. Every time a new morning dawns, you'll be attacked by another wave of pain. My mother was the same way."

“I… You really didn’t get remarried?”

My mom gently walks over to Fumi-san. She hesitates to touch her, but then rests her hand comfortingly on Fumi-san’s shoulder.

“But you were having a party the other day.”

Utsumi-san looks apologetically at Fumi-san, who is sobbing on the ground.

“That was my birthday party. I live nearby, so I was having some fun with my extra money.”

“Utsumi-san is an acquaintance of mine, same as the man from the mall,” I add.

“…You might not like hearing this, but I don’t think it would be a problem if I did get remarried. Being happy doesn’t mean you’re betraying the person you lost. Even if it did, wouldn’t that mean you already betrayed them by continuing to live? Even if it doesn’t feel like it, you’re fortunate to still be alive.”

My mom takes a pause to prepare herself before kneeling next to Fumi-san.

“My husband will be alone until the day comes that I die, but that doesn’t mean I have to stay chaste for him or anything. It’s painful to lose him, especially for my kids, but there’s more in my life than just that.”

My mom sounds hesitant, like she doesn’t really want to be saying this. Her voice is hoarse, and she has a stern expression. It’s not an expression I’ve seen on her before.

“I don’t want to experience heartbreak like that again. I never want to lose a loved one again.”

“I know that you’re suffering, but I’ll never understand exactly how you feel. I know firsthand how my own pain feels, but you have to set a limit on how much you let it affect you.”

One of Utsumi-san’s fellow police officers parks a police car next to the house. My mom holds out her hand to help Fumi-san up.

“If you’d like, I’ll lend a hand and help you along the way when you can’t bear it alone. But you’ll have to help yourself, too. You’ll have to live each day with your own strength… Fumi-chan, you’re not the same person you used to be. We’re both basically old ladies at this point, but that doesn’t mean this is the end, right?”

Tears well up in Fumi-san’s eyes. When she blinks, a tear rolls down her face.

“No. Time stopped for me on the day he died.”

Fumi-san doesn’t end up taking my mom’s hand. The police officers force her into the police car. She becomes enraged again, screaming and thrashing around as she’s locked in the car. The police car drives off, being watched by all the neighbours who came out to see what the noise was about. I can hear a jungle crow calling all alone.

Part 7

When the neighbours asked about what happened, my mom just told them that Fumi-san was just causing a disturbance because she was drunk. After everyone headed back home, my mom kept staring in the direction the police car went. I stand next to her, but for some reason she looks smaller than usual.

“I wonder if she’ll be okay,” my mom mumbles. I look at Sakurako-san for an answer.

“Well, if it’s her first offense, she’ll probably be let off with a fine of under 50 000 yen. That’s just for the crime of catching and killing crows and rabbits, I don’t know what else she’ll be charged with.”

My mom doesn’t know that she tried to run me over before. I feel bad for Fumi-san, but I hope she’s judged properly and I never have to see her again.

“I feel bad for her… She doesn’t seem like she can afford that.”

“I’m sure they can work something out for her.”

“I hope so.” My mom sighs.

“There’s no reason for you to feel guilty. You’re different from her. She has to face the consequences of her own actions.”

“That doesn’t mean it always seems right, though.”

I think Sakurako-san is trying to comfort my mom. When given that response, she looks surprised.

“I always thought you didn’t want to get remarried because you were worried about how us kids would react, and you liked your job too much to quit.” I quickly intervene and change the topic.

My mom shrugs, saying, “well, there’s that, but those aren’t the main reason.”

“They’re not? Then what is the main reason?”

My mom’s cheeks immediately turn red. She grins and pats me on the back.

“It’s because your dad was so handsome! Remember how you used to call actors on TV “papa” when you were little? I could never find a man that’s as attractive as he was!”

My mom laughs to hide her embarrassment as she pushes me back into the house.

“Okay, let’s have breakfast! If you just stand around you’ll be late!”

Sakurako-san watches the two of us, then lets out a relieved sigh. She starts trying to head back to her car. My mom grabs Sakurako-san’s wrist.

“Wait. You’re coming, too.”

“But I…”

“You came all the way here, I can’t just send you home without at least serving you some tea. If Fumi-chan hadn’t come today, you would have kept coming back until you caught her, right?”

My mom pushes the confused Sakurako-san through the front door, then quickly closes it. Sakurako-san looks at me like she wants help, but when I ask “are you okay” she nods. I haven't really thought about what would happen if Sakurako-san came over to my house. I pick up the socks that were sitting on the couch as my mom disappears into the kitchen. It feels a little awkward leaving Sakurako-san sitting on the couch, but I have to get ready for my day. When I return after taking a shower and getting changed, Sakurako-san is still sitting in the exact same position. She’s swinging her legs around, looking bored.

Soon, breakfast is ready. The sweet scent of butter and vanilla fills the house. Hooray! We’re having French toast!

“Maple syrup is good, but I recommend having jam with it. My dad’s recipe calls for cutting a thick slice of bread to form a pocket, filling it with ricotta cheese, then cooking it with an egg wash.”

It’s my chef grandpa’s special French toast. It’s moist and fluffy, and when you combine the jam with the cheese, the balance between the sweet and sour flavours is superb.

Sakurako-san isn't normally good with anything sour, but when she takes a bite, her face lights up. My mom puts the salad and cold corn soup on the table, and laughs at Sakurako-san's expression. However, even with the three of us at the table, no one is talking. My mom doesn't seem to accept Sakurako-san at all. I don't know what to say, either. The awkward silence is only interrupted by the sound of silverware clinking. Sakurako-san quietly puts down her fork and knife.

"…I'm not going to destroy your family," Sakurako-san says calmly.

My mom stops eating. "I know that."

She slowly takes a drink from her soup, then watches it sway in the cup for a while. She takes a deep breath.

"…I've heard a lot about you and the circumstances surrounding you and your family from Shouko-san. I know you probably suffer because of them, as well. Still, this boy isn't your younger brother."

"Of course." Sakurako-san, who has been listening while looking down, lifts her head. My mom nods.

"Right. That's fine, then. I hope you can understand. No matter what I say, this boy will gravitate toward you. But you have to promise to seriously not do anything dangerous anymore. I'm glad Utsumi-kun was off duty this morning as well."

I don't know what's going to happen now. My mom furrows her brow even more.

"Also, eat your salad properly. I gave you the expensive cherry tomatoes, so don't pick them out!" She shouts. Sakurako-san looks at me.

"That's right. If you don't eat them, those tomatoes are going to end up being my 3 o'clock snack."

"In that case, I guess I don't have to force myself to eat them…"

"What are you talking about! Fine then, just endure eating one of them. Tomatoes have lots of nutrients. Just one! They're small, so you can eat it in one bite. It'll be over really quick!"

My mom used to say the exact same thing to me when I was little. Thanks to that, I can eat pretty much anything.

For me, my mom is all I need. I can't even imagine having a dad at this point. Still, I think it's cute how my mom is so proud of my dad. My mom was unhappy after losing him. You can't ever fill the gap left behind when you lose a loved one. That's why I can't be Soutarou-kun. I can't even fill the gap left behind by my dad. Still, I can try to make my mom happy in my own way.

"Shoutarou, I already have seconds ready for you!"

I guess there was nothing to worry about, she's the same as usual. She plops another piece of French toast on my plate.

Final part

"I was worried after what happened the other day… I'm glad you're safe."

I'm at the coffee shop in the mall, a few days after the crow incident was resolved.

"You know, you could've just called instead of coming all the way to Asahikawa."

“You’re the one who said you wanted to talk to me, so I figured it wasn’t something to talk about over the phone.” Aoba-san is sitting across from me, grinning ear to ear.

This was kind of his fault… Still, I have something to discuss with him today.

“So, what is it?” He repositions his glasses and concentrates on me.

The smile disappears from his face. I guess even he can look serious.

“Well… I wanted to ask about how Fumi-san’s husband died.”

There were only skid marks from one vehicle where he crashed. There was no debris other than the bike he was riding, but the paint looked scratched like he’d hit something. They decided that the scratches were old, and it ended up being treated as a single vehicle accident. But Fumi-san was adamant that there were no scratches when he’d left the house.

“It says he died from fracturing his cervical vertebrae, so it would have been an instant death. Apparently it seemed like he fell off the road after failing to turn the corner properly. Do you think there’s a possibility that someone else was involved?”

“Well, I just think that just because there’s only one set of skid marks, it doesn’t mean another car wasn’t involved.”

“…Do you think they would have found something if they’d done an autopsy?” I ask Aoba-san quietly, so other people don’t hear.

“Maybe it would help, or maybe not. For example, it would be clear if the person involved was hit by another vehicle.”

If there’s no clear evidence on the body, it’s hard to tell how many vehicles were involved.

“At least with an autopsy, the cause of death would be clear. It could have been due to the fractured cervical vertebrae, damage to the chest and internal organs, or blood loss. If it was blood loss, he might have been able to be saved if he’d gotten immediate medical treatment.”

Even so, it’s not like knowing that now will change what happened. There’s no point in telling any of this to Fumi-san. It would only hurt her more. Still, I’d like to know the truth, even if it’s impossible to find out at this point.

“Unfortunately, there’s cases like this all over Japan. There’s countless people who turn to bone before having the truth discovered. The dead can’t share their stories unless the people left living change their tune, or the tears of the bereaved families take the system down.”

“I wish the police would investigate more carefully…”

I feel like I have to put my unfocused anger into words. Of course I know there’s lots of police officers who take their job seriously, like Ariwara-san, Utsumi-san, and Yamaji-san.

“No, that’s not right. This is a problem with the justice system, not the police. Everything is supposed to be analyzed carefully, except for the body. Japanese culture sees cutting into or damaging a corpse in any way as defiling it. This leaves the family of the deceased without any answers,” Aoba-san says to me decisively.

He’s looking straight into my eyes. I can see in his eyes that he feels just as helpless, sad, and angry as I do. It’s the same look I saw in professor Shitara before.

“Sometimes I think about how I would feel if it happened to me.”

There are times when I think of the human corpses I’ve seen so far, and think of my family and friends, and even my own life. What would have happened to me if my mom ended up trapped in loneliness, like Fumi-san is?

“…How can we change it?” I ask Aoba-san, slamming my hand on the table.

“You could try raising your voice.”

“My voice?”

“Yes. We need as many people as possibly to reach out to the dead.”

He wraps his big, warm hands around mine. I’m overwhelmed by fear for a moment, but miraculously manage to shake it off.

“The young lady of the Kujou family is a genius. She’s a monster by nature, but she’s not Professor Shitara. He believes in the power of ordinary people. That’s why I respect him so much.”

The ice in my iced coffee crackles. This should have been a good thing to hear, so why do I feel like I’m drowning in tar?

Second Bone: Mystery on a Rainy Night

If you drive for about an hour out of Asahikawa, you'll find the famous sunflower fields in Hokuryuu-cho. From the end of July to early September, 1.5 million sunflowers over an area of 23 hectares bloom in unison. Sitting in Sakurako-san's living room, a TV program about the flowers currently blooming comes on. Sakurako-san says she's planning to go see them this weekend. I'm surprised that she would want to go see flowers. Apparently there's an ostrich ranch in the area, and she heard that they recently had one pass away from an acquaintance.

"I was just planning to go see the sunflowers after I pick up the frozen ostrich, but if you want to see them, why don't you come with me?"

I decide I have to go along after seeing the ice cream they serve there on the TV show. I'm worried that I'm overstepping my bounds, but I invite Isozaki-sensei to come with us. As I expected, he agrees to go as soon as I mention the flowers. For some reason Utsumi-san is coming, too. I keep telling myself that Isozaki-sensei just pretends to be annoyed by Utsumi-san, and they're actually friends. If Isozaki-sensei really hated him, he wouldn't hesitate to cut off all contact.

So, on a Sunday in the middle of summer, I take a trip to Hokuryuu-cho with Sakurako-san, Isozaki-sensei, and Utsumi-san. Unfortunately, the sky is covered in grey clouds, and the forecast calls for rain in the afternoon. Despite the weather, Isozaki-sensei gets to see his flowers, Utsumi-san gets to show his excellent navigation skills (or maybe good intuition) in a maze, and Sakurako-san and I get to try the sunflower ice cream. The ice cream is rich, with a nutty fragrance and occasional crunchy bit from the ground up sunflower seeds in it.

I thoroughly enjoyed my sunflower themed trip. Of course, Sakurako-san picked up her ostrich, which turned out to still be quite young. Unfortunately, the skeleton will be donated to another facility after it's been assembled. Sakurako-san really wanted an ostrich for herself, so she decides that she'll come back another time to get her own, and settles for taking a dead duck they'd been raising separately.

Since gran packed lunch for everyone, we pick up some local flowers for her (which were quite cheap, according to Isozaki-sensei). It starts raining just as we start heading home. It was great timing. We talk about how we'd like to come back on a sunny day, but also the fear of heatstroke, on the hour-long drive home.

While gazing out at the rural landscape, I notice the rain gradually becoming stronger. There's wide streaks of rain on the passenger side window, even though we aren't going very fast.

"The rain is getting worse, huh?"

"It's a welcome rain," Isozaki-sensei says as he looks at the white flowers blooming in the fields.

I think they're potato plants? It looks like they're in full bloom right now. They dye the field a gentle colour.

His Excellency, Diavel's new release solemnly fills the car. Utsumi-san looks like he's about to fall asleep, and Isozaki-sensei is enjoying the scenery. Inevitably, the inside of the car

is quiet. While watching the windshield wipers moving rhythmically back and forth, I remember something that Higuruma-sensei from the infirmary told me the other day.

"Oh yeah, Higuruma-sensei told me about a pretty scary experience on a rainy day once."

Sakurako-san, who is holding the steering wheel, frowns for a moment. Although humans haven't reached the point where everything in the world can be explained by science so we can't deny the possibility, Sakurako-san is skeptical of things like ghosts and religion. But that's fine. Regardless of whether they're real or not, I'm just using a ghost story to make conversation.

It's a pretty simple story. In early May each year, Higuruma-sensei would visit his uncle in Horokanai-cho. It's a town diagonally above Asahikawa, known for its soba. You can catch pond smelt and Japanese huchen that get up to 2 metres long in the lake there, so it's popular among fishermen. The huchen at the Yamano aquarium is popular recently, and was captured there. It's a quiet town, filled with nature. I've been there several times.

It all started around 10 years ago, when Higuruma-sensei was still living in Sapporo. He had gone to visit his uncle in Horokanai after work that day, and was almost at his destination. It was a rainy night. The only sound was that of the windshield wipers moving back and forth. He was tired from driving along the long, monotonous road. Fortunately, there hadn't been any other cars in the past 30 minutes, so he could drive at his own pace… Until "that" suddenly appeared. It only lasted a moment.

"Whoa!"

Thump. The car shook.

He thought he saw someone cross in front of the headlights, and felt an indescribable sensation in his palms. It seemed like he had hit something soft.

"Did I hit a person?"

In an instant, he felt wide awake. What just happened? Rather, what was someone doing outside without an umbrella at this hour? Various theories ran through his head as he quickly climbed out of the car.

"…Huh?"

He noticed something strange right away. There were no signs of a person anywhere. But that can't be. He checked under and around the car, but he didn't find a body or anything. There was nothing resembling a person. It was on a country road surrounded by fields during a torrential rainstorm. There was no roadkill, let alone people around. The car was also completely undamaged, but he was sure he felt himself hit something. He thought about calling the police, but decided not to because he didn't want to waste their time.

He made it back to his relative's house with an anxious feeling looming over him. He investigated any accidents that happened in the area, but nothing came up about it. He doesn't believe in ghosts, but having something like that happen to him made him wonder. The only thing that springs to mind is that he was driving an old, second hand car at the time. He has an acquaintance who would say things like "sometimes used cars are inhabited by bad things." It was a good price for the condition it was in so he thought he'd made a good choice, but this experience made him anxious about it.

In the end nothing happened, but it was so eerie that he didn't want to drive the car at night, so Higuruma-sensei got rid of the car not long after. He got a new car second hand soon

after, and gave his old car to his brother who had a newborn at the time. After that, he didn't have any more strange experiences, so his fear gradually faded. The whole incident should have been over now.

"But when I went to my uncle's house in Horokanai last year, it happened again. There was nothing visibly there, but I felt myself hit something soft."

It wasn't in the same spot, and he didn't see a ghost or anything, but he was sure he had hit something. Just like before, he couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. It was on another rainy night. He says he can still hear the sound of the rain beating against him.

"He said he'd bought a new car about a month before that, but it wasn't used this time. It's a two seater called an S660 or something. He really likes it, so he doesn't want to get rid of it if the car isn't what's causing it… Since it was raining again this year, he didn't make the trip by car."

I tried to laugh it off at the time, but I've been nervous about being in a car on rainy nights since I heard that story. I'll definitely be careful next time I go to Horokanai. Higuruma-sensei isn't the type of teacher to try to scare students with a fake story at all. He's a big guy, so he's been nicknamed Kuma-sensei (kuma = bear), but he's also serious and kind, so he's popular with the girls. The ghost story he told me was a lot scarier than any horror movie.

"There's something eerie about rainy days, isn't there?"

After finishing my story, I look at Isozaki-sensei and Sakurako-san. They don't react at all. My story was a complete flop.

"That sure is strange."

"Huh? It's… Just strange?"

"Hmm, I can't think of an explanation," Utsumi-san says, trying to impersonate Sakurako-san. He leans back in his seat and rubs his eyes sleepily.

I guess it's a pretty run of the mill ghost story, but I think it's creepy how there's no logical explanation for it.

"You said he saw something jump out in front of the car? But then he ran over something?"

"Yeah, he said that he was sure that he felt the car go over something soft."

"That's strange, isn't it? Normally people are either thrown over the car, or pushed to the side of it. Have you ever seen an accident in the news where the front windshield was smashed?"

"Now that you mention it…"

"Basically, if someone gets hit by a car, the tires don't go over the person. It's like… something to do with physics that's difficult to explain."

On top of being a general police officer, Utsumi-san is also in charge of responding to vehicle accidents. There's a lot of accidents involving wild animals as well as people, especially in Hokkaido. With his experience and knowledge, his words are pretty persuasive.

"Since this is a ghost story, accuracy isn't really the focus, but there is a big contradiction around the accident. Doesn't something seem strange? Please tell me he didn't really hit a ghost, or I might be too scared to sleep alone tonight."

“That’s right. Everything moves in accordance with gravity. For example, if someone were walking in front of a small truck. If you don’t tie everything down firmly and have to suddenly break, the cargo will move forward. That’s due to the law of inertia.”

Sakurako-san takes over Ustsumi-san’s shaky explanation.

“Then did Higuruma-sensei make up that story to scare me?”

Honestly, I don’t think he’s the type to do that.

“If it isn’t made up, the person in question misunderstood something. It’s common to see visual illusions while driving. Unless you were being teased, his brain was playing tricks on him,” Sakurako-san snickers.

“You’re always so quick to call things unscientific… I guess I’m an idiot for believing him.”

Even though it’s still so dark and rainy out, the conversation has shifted to something mundane again.

“That’s not quite right, strictly speaking. Even I acknowledge that there’s some cases that can’t be explained rationally. Maybe it’s just something humanity hasn’t discovered yet, or maybe there really are mysterious phenomena in this world. However, most of the time, it only seems mysterious due to ignorance or fear. I just think this kind of thing is ridiculous.”

Sakurako-san goes on to explain how some scholars say “the more you study in science, the more you believe in god.” I think she might just be calling me an idiot in a roundabout way. I turn away from Sakurako-san and press my cheek against the window. I like feeling the cool glass and rumbling of the car. It’s not the first time Sakurako-san has made fun of me, but it’s frustrating that she spoke badly of Higuruma-sensei.

“…Then how would you solve this mysterious case, Kujou-san?” Isozaki-sensei pipes up.

He didn’t seem interested in the conversation at all until now. I sit back up in my seat so I can participate in the conversation.

“What?”

“Since you’re so smart, how about you educate us, the ignorant?”

Sakurako-san frowns for a moment at his challenging tone. Now that I think about it, Isozaki-sensei is friends with Higuruma-sensei as well.

“…”

The inside of the car falls silent. I could cut the tension in the air with a knife. The only noise is the loud clacking of the windshield wipers.

“Y-yeah, as it is now, I might get too scared to go on patrols at night. Could you give us a little hint or something? You must know something, right, Kujo-san?” Utsumi-says in a joking tone, trying to quickly lighten the mood.

Sakurako-san keeps driving silently, as if she’s thinking.

“…Okay, let’s start by focusing on why it happened both 10 years ago as well as last year. He goes to the same place at the same time every year. If he’s used to it, he’s probably driving at a pretty consistent speed. However, the exceptions are that 10 years ago and last year he bought a new car, and it was raining,” Sakurako-san says, glancing at the rear view mirror.

“Utsumi, did you notice anything strange when you heard the story?”

Utsumi-san's eyes go wide after suddenly being called out to. However, he seems to have something in mind. He thinks for a while while stroking the stubble on his chin. He takes a sip of his sports drink before he begins to speak.

"Um, well, the first thing that comes to mind is the thump sound he apparently heard. On a rainy day while driving at a regular speed, you probably wouldn't be able to hear anything if you hit something. Also, it's not uncommon for the thing you hit to end up 20-30 metres away."

"Really? That much?"

I thought it would only be a couple of metres. Is the impact that strong?

"There's something weird about the shaking he felt when he said he hit something. How many tires are on a car?"

"There's 4."

"Right. 2 on the front and back. So isn't it strange that he didn't hear 2 thumps as he went over the victim?"

"Oh…"

"Cars can't stop very quickly. Even if you stopped right away, you wouldn't only feel it once. Of course there's times when something gets caught on the front wheel, or it isn't aligned the right way… But for something the size of a human, it's normal to feel it twice."

Utsumi-san takes yet another gulp of his drink and sighs.

"Then maybe he hit a person but they were sent flying further away…? He could have stepped on a shoe or something that fell off, right?"

"No, the car would have been damaged in that case, unless he was driving pretty slowly."

Because of all the rain making it humid, Utsumi-san's hair is even frizzier than usual.

"Even if it was a ghost, I don't think the same thing would have happened again. Maybe this would all add up if this was the ghost of an ant or something, but that doesn't make much sense on its own right. This story just doesn't make any sense," Sakurako-san takes over the explanation.

"So basically, there's no evidence that Higuruma hit a person, either living or dead. I'm of the same opinion at Utsumi. Something isn't adding up."

"You're right… It sounds like a horror movie plot."

"You got it! That's the main flaw in the story. Higuruma likely made it up to make it sound scarier."

Sakurako-san lightly taps her hand against the steering wheel.

"Then he just made it all up?"

"It might not be. Humans can be quite delusional. Higuruma's own fear might have caused him to tell the story in a way that sounds scarier, even if he didn't intend to. There's something about May that everyone fears," Sakurako-san says, smiling.

"Boy. What's the most obvious feature of the roads during spring?"

"Huh?"

I'm surprised by the sudden question. I don't know what to say on such short notice.

"You should be quite familiar with it from riding your bike."

She gives me a hint, clearly starting to get frustrated that I don't know the answer.

"…Oh! I know! The road is all bumpy!"

"That's right. Do you know why?" Sakurako-san nods after I give the right answer.

The roads and walkways get cracked from the ice, and in spring you can finally feel the difference because there's no snow covering it. I'm always scared to ride my bike in spring, because I'm worried I'll bite my tongue from all the bumps. The potholes usually get fixed over the course of the year, but then winter comes again… It's an endless circle. Is she really saying that this was all a misunderstanding because of a pothole? I look to Isozaki-sensei in the back seat for help, and he sighs.

"Umm… It deteriorates the road when they plow it, when people drive on it, and from the weight of the snow, right?"

There must be a more interesting answer. She probably wouldn't ask us if this was all there is to it.

"The answer I was looking for is frost heaving, which is when water freezes under the asphalt. Water expands when it freezes into ice. The pressure from the ice pushes the asphalt up, causing it to crack. Once the ice melts, there's nothing supporting the road anymore, so it can't support as much weight as before. That's how you end up creating a pothole when you drive over the wrong spot."

Isozaki-sensei sighs with an expression saying that he didn't know that. I feel kind of ashamed.

"Road maintenance is prioritised based on how often the road is used. The road could have appeared to be flat."

I look at the road construction going on out the car window as we pass by.

"This is just a guess, but I wonder if the feeling of hitting 'something' on a rainy day reminded him of a past experience? That could have made him think it was a ghost in the first place. Due to a few overlapping coincidences, he made it out to be something more than it really was."

It's a believable explanation, but is that really all there is to it?

"Then how do you explain the squishy feeling?"

"Oh yeah. That's not like you, Kujo-san. You didn't explain everything. You won't be able to convince Shoutarou like that."

It does feel like the explanation is a bit lacking. Just as I'm thinking that, Isozaki-sensei starts speaking, interrupting Sakurako-san as she's about to talk.

"Huh?"

"One more point is the place, Horokanai," he says with a mischievous smile.

That's when I realize it. Isozaki-sensei probably knew the answer from the beginning.

"Let's listen to your theory, then," Sakurako-san snorts angrily.

"I don't think Kujo-san's theory is too far off. It's not purely coincidence that so many things overlapped. I looked it up when I first heard the story from Higuruma-san. The weather 10 years ago and last year. Both years had a mild winter, below average amounts of snow, and spring arrived early."

Now that he mentions it, I remember the snow melting really early last year.

"Horokanai was no exception. Like Asahikawa, it's located in a basin, so since the temperature was higher than normal, spring came early. That means people started growing plants earlier, too."

I don't realise what Isozaki-sensei is trying to say at first. Isozaki-sensei is resting his head on the window and watching the scenery outside, while Utsumi-san and I look at him in confusion.

"Buckwheat is a relatively easy crop to grow, but it likes to have a lot of water. Buckwheat is a widely grown crop in Horokanai. The soil is fertile, and has lots of clay. Clay helps store lots of water and nutrients for the seedlings to help them grow."

Until now, I'd only made a slight connection between Horokanai and buckwheat. In Asahikawa, Shintoku soba and Etanbetsu soba are well known, but there's a soba festival every year in Horokanai that brings in soba lovers from all over the country. I've heard that buckwheat is easier to grow than rice and can be harvested sooner, but unless it's a local specialty or there's a specific reason to grow it, people usually plant rice instead.

"He was driving on a road surrounded by fields. Buckwheat is usually planted from late May to early June, but it was warmer than usual that year. It's likely that people were already starting to work their fields, so the road was likely covered in mud and soil."

I make eye contact with Isozaki-sensei through the side mirrors, and he nods at me.

"Clay soil is great at retaining water, but that also means it has poor drainage. That means the soil under the asphalt was likely mushy. From the swampy mud and the bumpy road from spring, he likely mistook a lump of squishy mud as something else. If he hit a pothole and stepped in mud in the dark, his car would be undamaged, and it would be difficult to figure out what happened."

"No matter how dark it is, how could someone mistake a pothole and a lump of mud for a human or animal carcass?!"

I'm not convinced by Isozaki-sensei's explanation, but… When I look at Sakurako-san, she nods.

"It was a preconception, boy. It was a dark, rainy night, so he was already feeling on edge. Then he happened to hit 'something' with his car on top of that. When he stepped in the mud, he was just seeing what he expected to see."

"Then if he just stepped in mud, how do you explain the human figure he saw?"

Even if everything else could make sense, they haven't explained the ghostly figure he saw jump in front of the car.

"Didn't I tell you already? People see the things they want to see. The brain can be unreliable." She gives an exaggerated sigh as she says it, as if she's wondering why I still need more things explained to me. "There's phenomena such as pareidolia and simulacra. Pareidolia is a phenomenon where formless things such as clouds or a stain on the wall look like a human or other shape. Simulacra is the phenomenon where the human brain registers any figure consisting of three dots as a human face. Take a look at the car ahead of us. The two tail lights and the license plate… Hahaha, it looks kind of like a funny face, right?" Sakurako-san says while pointing at the car diagonally in front of us.

It's a pink Suzuki Lapin. Looking at the bright red tail lights, it really does look like a silly face. The lights are round, red eyes, the seam from the trunk is the mouth, and the handle is the nose. The license plate could be a beard. Now that I'm thinking about it, even the Lapin logo looks like freckles.

"He was drowsy and it was raining while he was driving. There were no oncoming cars. On a rural road there aren't many streetlights. He was relying on only his car's headlights and

his tired eyes. It's especially easy to fall prey to hallucinations at night. In other words, he likely saw something that didn't exist. Also, the situation of being alone in the dark probably had him on edge. Hearing the sound of the wipers 70-80 times per minute could have an effect, as well. It's the same rate as the pulse of a moderately tense person."

"The pulse…"

I imagine the scene again as she described it. Nighttime, it's dark and raining. Continuing down a dark, endless road Alone. The only person driving on the road. The sound of rain and repetitive windshield wipers. I've thought about it since I was a kid. Windshield wipers sound like a heartbeat. It's the same rhythm as when you're a bit anxious or after you run a bit. Like a racing heart. It's strangely uncomfortable. I've never liked being in the car on rainy days, even as a child.

"The mental feeling of oppression, trees along the side of the road, rain illuminated by the light… At the same moment all those things overlapped, he hit the lump of clay soil. That's the truth behind what Higuruma hit with his car."

I wonder if this is exactly what the saying "the ghost, when closely examined, is withered silver grass" is talking about.

Of course, this is all just a guess. Higuruma-sensei isn't even here to verify. This is all just us imagining what might have happened on our own. I feel like the truth behind fear exists within all of us like this.

"Then… I guess this wasn't a supernatural phenomenon, after all. I'm a little relieved."

I'm a little disappointed, though. I definitely don't want to meet a real ghost, though. But for some reason, Isozaki-sensei is laughing.

"Well, that's one way to think of it."

"What?"

Utsumi-san looks surprised, too.

"There's one detail that Higuruma-san didn't tell you, Shoutarou. There's a specific day he visits Horokanai every year. He told you it was early in the month, but there's actually a set date."

"It was for his uncle's birthday… Right?"

But now that I think about it, why not just wait until a multi-day break to visit? It would be better to go during golden week or something instead of travelling all that way after work.

"He may be in Asahikawa now, so it would be an easy trip, but he was living in Sapporo at the time. But the reason he travelled all that way after leaving work was for a specific reason - it was the anniversary of his cousin's death."

"His cousin died?!"

I gasp.

"His cousin was two years older than him, but died at the age of 12. His cousin was really special to him. He goes to Horokanai on the day she passed away every year. Even if it's a weekday or a stormy night."

The day someone important to him died. It's been over 10 years since then, but he still travels there every year. It's easy to imagine how deep of a mark she left on his heart.

"Higuruma-san was driving on a boring road while tired, it was very likely he could have gotten into a real accident. He feels like it could have been like a warning from her. This is also a coincidence, but in the language of flowers, buckwheat means 'I'll save you'."

“Ah…”

Higuruma-sensei really has been nervous about driving since that day. Not only when he goes to Horokanai, but also when he’s driving at night or on a rainy day. He feels very reluctant to grab the steering wheel. Although it’s a heartwarming yet tear jerking story, Utsumi-san lets out a shriek.

“So what happened, Icchan?! Was it a ghost that did it?!”

“Who knows.” Isozaki-sensei laughs as he refuses to confirm or deny.

Utsumi-san curls up his body on the seat. Sakurako-san says “how foolish,” as if she doesn’t believe in it at all.

“Either way, if you have it all figured out, you should tell Higuruma-sensei. You already knew the answer before, didn’t you, Isozaki-sensei?”

“Yeah, you even went as far as to look into the weather when it happened.”

“No way.”

“Why?”

“Why should I tell you?” Isozaki-sensei says, turning away to look out the window again.

“There’s something funny about a guy who looks like a bear being scared of ghosts,” Isozaki-sensei says, bursting into laughter.

“Th-that’s so mean!”

How can he be so heartless?! Sakurako-san furrows her eyebrows. Utsumi-san looks like he agrees with Isozaki-sensei, saying “you have a point.”

“It’s probably best if you don’t say anything about it being the ghost of his cousin. It’s better if he drives extra cautiously, anyway. Do you think it would really help if he knew it wasn’t a ghost?”

“Utsumi-san…”

“It’s always good to drive safely and cautiously,” Utsumi-san says, crossing his arms and looking smug.

He has a point. It’s best if Higuruma-sensei drives cautiously so he doesn’t end up accidentally hurting someone, even if he never actually hit anyone in the first place. On the other hand, Higuruma-sensei is seriously scared, so I have mixed feelings about keeping the truth from him.

“This really is a trivial matter.” Even at times like this, Sakurako-san is the same as always. She lets out a big yawn.

“Utsumi, if you’re so big on safe driving, switch with me. I’m starting to get drowsy.”

“No, I haven’t slept since I had work. Besides, driving after that story I just heard is kind of…”

“What?”

Sakurako-san turns around to complain while she’s stopped at a red light. Utsumi-san and Isozaki-san both avoid making eye contact with her.

“I haven’t slept, either, since I’ve been busy lately,” Isozaki-san says.

“I’ve been busy, too, and I’m sleepy! Why don’t you think about how I feel?!” Sakurako-san’s face turns red with anger.

“Anyway, look out the window. Hokuryuu-cho is known for growing buckwheat. There’s dainty, white flowers all over the fields here. It’s not just the sunflowers that are in full bloom right now, you know.”

Everyone turns to look outside. I thought all those white flowers were from potatoes, but apparently they're from buckwheat.

"In the language of flowers, buckwheat also means 'fond memories.' They say 'it snows twice a year in Horokanai' since it not only snows in winter, but the fields covered in white buckwheat flowers look like snow, too. This town is covered in pure white lace twice a year. Horokanai is a must-visit spot in summer."

"…I look forward to the soba festival in fall, and the pond smelt fishing in winter most."

As soon as I say that, my stomach growls, so everyone laughs at me. I'm still a growing boy, so just eating onigiri and ice cream isn't enough for me. I think that once I can go on a drive with Sakurako-san, this would be a nice place to visit. She reminds me of the white flowers, after all. Of course, it'll have to be on a clear day. I'd like to go before our time together runs out.

Third Bone: Lizzie Borden on August 4th

Lizzie Borden took an axe,
Hit her father forty whacks,
When she saw what she had done,
She hit her mother forty-one.

Part 1

It's around the end of July, and I'm near the Kujou house, brushing Hector while walking him. There's not a cloud in the sky, so even though it's not too hot, the sunlight is still strong. I decided to walk Hector in the morning so I didn't get heatstroke, but he decided to lay in the shade under a tree and now refuses to move. I tried pleading with him, but now I'm brushing him until he decides to move on his own. He has his paws stretched up to the sky. How uncouth.

I suddenly hear the sound of an engine approaching. Hector noticed it before I did. He suddenly twists around to stand up. His fluffy ears are perked up and he's barking. It's a playful, excited bark rather than an aggressive one. His tail couldn't possibly be wagging any faster.

"Shh, quiet down Hector. Good boy!"

Shouko-san gets out of her taxi and stands in front of us. She happily greets Hector before she even notices me.

"Oh, you're here too, Shou-chan? Perfect timing."

She holds out the watermelon she brought over as a present. I nearly jump for joy when I see that black and red box.

"A Densuke watermelon? Yay!"

I take it from her and head to the entrance to call gran and Sakurako-san. Hector is so excited that he runs into the house without having his feet wiped. Gran scolds him, but he's so excited that he play-bows and howls.

"Goodness, you're so noisy," Sakurako-san says as she walks down the stairs.

The light shining from behind her shows the outline of her legs through her white dress. Gran is hurrying to prepare, so I don't think Shouko-san told them she was going to visit. It's around lunchtime now.

"Sorry, I already have something prepared," Shouko-san says, holding up a box of sushi.

Lucky me. The watermelon has to cool for a while, so we'll have it as an afternoon snack. After we eat, Shouko-san sprawls out on the couch. Hector loves Shouko-san, so he lays on top of her to be pet. Hector has only been in the Kujou family for a year now, but he acts like he's lived here his whole life. He's so cute that way. Shouko-san is smiling ear to ear as she pets Hector. She's always happy to pet the resident fluff ball for hours, but for some reason, she seems a little more distant than usual.

"Is something wrong?"

Apparently Sakurako-san was thinking the same thing. The only difference is that she didn't hesitate to say anything.

"No, nothing in particular." Shouko-san slowly shakes her head.

“That’s not how it looks,” Sakurako-san says.

Hector brings his pigs ear over and presses it into Shouko-san’s hand, like he’s saying “please hold this for me so it’s easier to eat.” Once she grabs it, he lays down and starts gnawing on his treat.

“You’re such a bad boy, Hector!” Shouko-san says.

The room is silent, other than the gnawing and snorting sounds of Hector chewing.

“Well… Let’s just say I didn’t want to be alone. It’s hot out, so I thought everyone would enjoy some watermelon,” Shouko-san says quietly. She doesn’t sound very confident, so I think she’s lying.

Sakurako-san looks disappointed. She’s usually indifferent to people, so the fact that she cares so much shows just how important Shouko-san is to her. Shouko-san is an incredibly important person to Sakurako-san. And vice versa, as well.

“…No, that’s not really why I’m here. There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

Before long Shouko-san gently closes her eyes and lets out a long sigh.

“I should probably go home soon.” I say, and quickly start to stand up, but Shouko-san grabs onto my cargo pants.

“It’s fine. Please stay.”

Hector rushes over and pushes the top of his head against my leg as if he’s saying he won’t let me leave.

“Oh… Okay…”

Hector rests his chin on my knee after I sit back down. He stretches out his back legs so he can be on Shouko-san’s lap, too. With perfect timing, gran brings us some warm tea. It’s milk tea with a gentle colour. Shouko-san stares at her tea cup as if she’s choosing her words carefully.

“Actually, it’s almost the anniversary of my good friend’s death.”

“That’s… sad, huh…”

She quietly starts to speak. Her words make my chest sting.

“This will be the 10th anniversary.”

That’s a long time. But it’s also a short period of time simultaneously. Looking at Shouko-san’s sorrowful eyes tells me just how painful this is for her.

“Just when I was starting to feel like it was all over, her name and face have been showing up on TV lately since it’s almost the 10th anniversary. It’s really painful.”

“…On TV?”

Sakurako-san, who has been looking bored while listening until now, suddenly sits up and looks shocked.

“10 year anniversary of their death… Could it be the Lizzie Borden of the Heisei era?”

“Huh?”

I reflexively let out a noise of surprise. Shouko-san doesn’t deny it.

“…It’s a long story, I don’t know if you want to hear it.”

Shouko-san takes a sip of her tea and a deep breath to prepare herself.

The Lizzie Borden of the Heisei era - Noriko Endou. She murdered her stepmother and father, then committed suicide. It happened in Sapporo.

It's said that basically everyone in the United States has heard of Lizzie Borden. She murdered her parents on August 4th, 1892, in Fall River, Massachusetts. She was soon arrested and questioned by the police. There's even a children's song about her to the tune of Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay. She murdered her father and stepmother, Abby, with a hatchet in the sweltering summer heat. However, nobody was ever charged with their murder. Despite being ostracised, Lizzie continued to claim she was innocent. It's largely due to how women were seen in society at the time, and the lack of a clear motive. Lizzie died at the age of 67 without ever disclosing the truth of what happened to her parents.

10 years ago on August 4th, there was a murder in an upscale neighbourhood in Sapporo. Noriko Endou was a high school history teacher. She murdered her father and step mother with a pick axe used for clearing ice, then dismembered her with a knife. The case became a hot topic in the news, and was dubbed "the Lizzie Borden of the Heisei era". I was still little when it happened, but I've still heard of it. I've been hearing about it a lot lately, since it's the 10th anniversary since it happened. I watched a sketchy program on TV that claimed to call upon her spirit and talk to her. There's one thing everyone wants to know. Why did Noriko Endou commit murder that day?

Part 2

Noriko Endou was the only daughter of her father, Noriyasu Endou. He was a company executive, so Noriko Endou grew up living a comfortable life. Her mother died when she was very young, so her father's sister, Emiko, took the role of her mother. I've heard that the two of them got along so well that they were mistaken for really being mother and daughter. Emiko used to have a family of her own, but her husband and beloved daughter passed away in a fire. They say that's why Noriko was so important to her.

However, when Noriko was 14 years old, her father remarried. Noriko opposed the marriage, but in the end, Emiko was forced out of their house and family. Noriko did not get along with her new step mother. Noriko used to be really close with her aunt, but her step mother wanted them to be more like a real family, so she cut off all contact between Noriko and her aunt. When they met up to have a discussion, Emiko and the step mother, Nao, started arguing until a noise complaint was made to the police. As a result, Emiko was kicked out of the Endou family, and had to cut all ties with them. Due to that, Noriko was isolated at home.

Noriko didn't move out of her parents' home even after reaching adulthood, and never married due to her father's strict control. She eventually killed her father and step mother during summer when she was 38 years old. The reason isn't clear. Some say that her hatred had been boiling up over the years until it reached a breaking point. Others say that she was imitating the Lizzie Borden incident. It was a nightmare in the middle of a swelteringly hot summer. Everyone who knew her unanimously said they never thought she would do something like that. I can only imagine that she was in turmoil over the isolation she was forced into.

"Nori-chan and I went to middle school and high school together. We were both living in the dormitory at the time. Our rooms were next door to each other, so we got to know each

other… We both had family issues, so we naturally bonded.” Shouko-san softly begins to speak while holding her tea cup.

I’m honestly shocked that Shouko-san has a connection to a bloodthirsty killer like her.

“Um… What was she like?”

She bursts out laughing at my question.

“It's the answer everyone expects. Normal? She could be a bit serious sometimes, but other than that she was wonderful. She was an honest, upright girl. Kind, and good at taking care of others.”

She was normal even up to a few days before the incident. There was no indication that something was on her mind. They were even planning to go on a trip together. Of course, she never mentioned being worried about anything. Shouko-san feels disappointed about that. She thought they were best friends.

“We were planning a trip together just before the incident. I still can’t believe it. People say I’m not facing the facts, but there’s no way Nori-chan would kill someone. If she really did kill someone, I’m sure there was a good reason why she had to,” Shouko-san says. “Even if we can’t talk to each other, I’d like to at least understand. With that in mind, I’ve left her house as it was.”

“As it was?”

“Yes. Of course, her distant relatives inherited her money, but I bought her house. I thought I might be able to find something out one day.”

I’m sure that if she hadn’t bought the house, it would have been demolished and had a new one built on top. Shouko-san sighs.

“But it’s already been 10 years. The house is starting to show its age, so I think it’s about time I sorted out my feelings.”

“Are you sure you’re fine with hearing what my verdict will be?”

“Yes… I can handle it.” Shouko-san mumbles. She seems worried about what will happen.

Shouko-san covers her face with her hands. Hector goes up to her in an attempt to comfort her. He forces himself in between her arms. He’s always ready to cuddle and lick someone who’s crying. Shouko-san gives Hector a lonely smile before hugging him. Dogs are amazing. I’m sure Sakurako-san, gran, and I wouldn’t be able to comfort her like that.

“There’s a reason I’ve never told you about this before, Saa-chan. You’re so curious that I was scared you would try to dig up her secrets. I was scared… Of what the truth would be,” she says, pressing her face into Hector’s soft fur.

The truth isn’t always pretty, sometimes it’s better to leave it hidden.

“But it’s been 10 years. If I’m still thinking of Nori-chan this much, I’m sure I can handle the truth.”

Shouko-san lets go of Hector and reaches her hand out to Sakurako-san.

“Please, Sakurako. Please tell me what happened that day. Everything, even if it’s something I don’t want to hear.”

When Sakurako-san takes Shouko-san’s hand, Shouko-san pulls her into a hug. Sakurako-san doesn’t resist, but she doesn’t hug back, either. Geez, she could stand to put in some effort. I always wonder what Sakurako-san is thinking at times like these. I know they

have a unique and special bond. They're not like friends, mother and child, or sisters. They're something completely different.

A few days later, we head to Sapporo. I feel out of place, but I was worried about the two of them going alone. Sometimes Sakurako-san's words can pierce like a knife. Today, we're taking the highway to Sapporo. Even though it's summer vacation, the traffic isn't too bad since it's a weekday. This isn't a very exciting trip, unfortunately. To match the dreary trip we're on, the sky is covered in grey clouds. I left my house early so we could stop at the rest stop in Sunagawa and get ice cream, but unfortunately we didn't end up passing it. We turn by Shinkawa and head towards Maruyama. I remember Azechi saying before that the crows in Maruyama Park are pure evil.

Maruyama is quieter and more upscale than I expected. We pass by a coffee stand on our way, and see a boy around 10 years old with straight cut bangs eating a sandwich, and an older man who appears to be his grandpa holding an instrument of some kind. It looks like a scene out of a picture. It's no wonder people were so shocked to hear about a murder in such a nice town. We continue driving up to a slightly more elevated area, and eventually reach a residential area. The house is on a steep slope.

"Hold on, I'll unlock the door."

The house is made of red bricks. Shouko-san takes a deep breath before she gets out of the car. There's a garage on the first floor. Shouko-san uses a key to manually open the garage door. It's kind of scary to go in, knowing a murder took place here. Just as Shouko-san said, there's lots of stuff left behind in the garage. The father probably had a car-related hobby, since there's dusty tools all over the place.

"It's really pretty."

The house doesn't look vacant from the outside, since the garden is well maintained.

"If I left the house looking empty, someone might try to break in, right? That's why I asked someone to occasionally check in on it."

I seems kind of ironic to me that she's trying to prevent a crime at a murder scene. Sakurako-san and I follow Shouko-san up the stairs and into the main part of the house. The cobwebs and spiders in the corners really emphasise that this place hasn't been lived in for a long time.

"The houses in Sapporo sure have big rooms, don't they?"

Looking in from the entranceway, the house feels like a mansion. Speaking of mansions, they usually have a lot of corners, but this house is quite square. The house looks like it's around 30 years old or so. It has a retro, western-style vibe going on. It's not as fancy as the Toudou family's house, though. It's a bit smaller than the Kujou house, too. The total floor space is probably about 100 tsubo, I think? (That's about 3500 square feet) There's no doubt that the Endou family was quite wealthy.

"The father did trade-related work. He had a lot of hobbies, too," Shouko-san says while reminiscing. But she cuts off there. She's holding the key to the house, but can't bring herself to open the door.

"I'll do it."

Even with a purpose, it's hard to visit the house of your former best friend. I take the key from Shouko-san and gently hand it over to Sakurako-san, who is standing behind me. Her face

is pale, like the blood has drained out of it. The keyhole is a bit stiff, probably because it hasn't been used much.

It's the rotary disc type with a cylinder key. My mom told me before that you can pick one of these locks with just a screwdriver, so they've been largely phased out in favour of dimple keys. Even the shape of the keys in this house are a sign of its history…

"…"

I turn the key and open the door. A faint light pours in, illuminating the newly disturbed dust in the air.

"I have a cleaning crew come in four times a year, but… I guess it's just a sign of how old this house is."

I should have brought a mask, but it's too late now. The white and brown colour palette matches how I imagined it from Shouko-san's description. There doesn't seem to be anything particularly valuable, like paintings and the like. The relatives must have taken anything they could get money from. The second floor has a western style room on the left side, and a kitchen, living room, and dining room on the right side.

"…So three people died here?"

"It didn't take long for the bodies to be discovered, so the house is still clean."

Apparently there aren't too many spots that got dirtied from the blood. Not that it makes me feel any better, The house has been maintained for all these years, but it feels like time has stopped. Even the subtle details in how the furniture is arranged make it feel like the house hasn't been lived in for a long time. Everything here is slightly outdated and off. The calendar still shows August from 10 years ago. The house smells like old fabric. Despite being properly cleaned and disinfected, the scent of the family who used to live here is deeply ingrained in the house. It's like the house is showing off how the residents used to live. Before "death" stole their lives from them.

"No matter how many times I come here, I never get used to it," Shouko-san mumbles while we walk to the living room.

"Are you okay?"

Rather than a response, she just gives me a lonely smile. I immediately regret asking such a stupid question.

I can hear the distinct sound of nitrile gloves snapping against skin from behind me. I turn around and see Sakurako-san putting on her gloves, just as I expected.

"If that's the case, you shouldn't have come. The criminal and victims are already dead and gone, after all."

"But someone else could have been the culprit, right?!" Shouko-san yells back.

Sakurako-san looks surprised.

"Things don't always work out the way we want," Sakurako-san says, inspecting the kitchen and dining room. "Let's go over what happened that day, step by step."

Part 3

The Heisei Lizzie Borden case attracted attention from people all over, even outside the prefecture. There are even websites about it online, even now.

“I’ve printed this out.”

I printed out the information from a few of the sites. I only did it so Shouko-san wouldn’t have to explain as much, since I know it’s hard for her. She just needs to tell us if anything is incorrect or needs to be added.

It happened on a Sunday, when Noriko, her father, and her step mother were at home. Based on their stomach contents, they ate breakfast at around 8am. It’s likely they all ate together, since they all seem to have eaten at around the same time. The only issue is that Noriko might have eaten separately, since she seemed to have mainly eaten toast while her father and stepmother ate rice, salmon, pickled vegetables, and tofu miso soup.

The kitchen is quite open, and has a good view of the dining room. The rooms in the house are large, since there’s not very many of them. From the window, you can see an arch of bright red roses, which Shouko-san still takes care of to this day.

“It doesn’t look like the mom cooked a separate meal for her daughter,” Sakurako-san says, peeking into the drawers that are still full of tableware.

“But Noriko-san was an adult, right? Maybe they just had a system where they make their own meals.”

It’s like that in my family, too. If I say “I feel like having eggs and toast” I get “then make it yourself” in response. It doesn’t necessarily mean that the step mother and daughter were on bad terms.

“It’s true that there’s several possible reasons. Noriko herself may have declined to eat what her parents were having, or she may just not have cared. Or she may have not been able to make much for herself because her step mother considers the kitchen her territory,” she says, turning to look at the kitchen.

It’s true that by looking at how uniform the cutlery and utensils are, you can tell that there was someone who controlled the kitchen.

“Or maybe her parents didn’t allow her much freedom. Some families have a hard rule about eating meals together every time.”

“Knowing Noriko-chan, she probably didn’t want to bother her step mother. I’m sure that the Endou family had a rule about eating together, as well. The parents were fine with eating different things as long as they were together,” Shouko-san, who has been listening silently, timidly speaks up. “It looked a little odd from the outside, but so does this house, doesn’t it?”

That’s certainly true. Even if it seems strange, each family is different. The wooden fruit basket sitting on the dining table reminds me that there really used to be a family living here.

All the members of the Endou family had a day off that day, but they didn’t have anything special going on. It seems like the step mother, Nao, had just cleaned the kitchen, and started on the rest of the house. She had recently been talking to her acquaintances about how she’s doing a lot of decluttering. Apparently they still had a lot of stuff from when the house was first built that they wanted to clean up. They were even talking about renovating. She complained that nobody in the family ever wanted to get rid of anything, but she had the most clothes out of everyone.

The father, Noriyasu, was heading to the home theatre in the garage. It had a large projector and high quality speakers. He had fallen in love with Akira Kurosawa’s movies after seeing them during the holiday. He was watching “Rashomon” at the time.

Just after 10am a delivery person came to deliver a package to the Endou family. It seems to have been Noriko-san who answered the door. After waiting for a while, Delivery Man A testified that he heard the faint sound of someone going down stairs. At the time there were no abnormalities with the room, her clothes, or her demeanour. She seemed slightly out of breath, and remarked about how hot it was that day. At the time he thought it was just because she had hurried down the stairs. She was wearing a beige dress. Everything seemed normal.

"By the way, this was the first time I had spoken to her," Delivery Man A testified.

The package that morning was sent from a calligraphy class that Noriko attended as a hobby.

"Then, an hour later, Noriyasu-san was murdered."

How could such a peaceful day end up like that? When we get to the home theatre, it's basically empty. This room is pretty empty, and the darkness inside almost looks like it's moving. Maybe I just have an overactive imagination**.** I mean, it is a murder scene, so it wouldn't be unusual for there to be "something" here. The room is soundproof, and there's no echo, like our voices are being sucked into the walls. It's so quiet that I can hear ringing in my ears.

"At the time, the couch was facing with the back towards the door," Shouko-san says, standing in the doorway like she doesn't want to enter the room.

On the other hand, Sakurako-san is walking all over the room, looking at everything,

"I think he was wearing headphones. Apparently they were covered in blood and lying on the floor. Because of that… He didn't notice he was about to be attacked. There's no evidence that he tried to defend himself."

The criminal hit Noriyasu-san with a pickaxe for clearing ice while he was absorbed in watching a movie. He was hit right on top of the head. According to the police, he was hit with no hesitation or mercy. Noriyasu-san died almost instantly from just that, but the murderer stabbed him through the heart with a knife afterwards. They left the knife in his chest and left the room. The blood coming from his head soaked through the couch and dripped onto the floor.

"The couch and carpet were completely soaked from the blood. I had the floorboards replaced, since the person who cleaned the scene recommended it. It caused the whole room to stink… I hope that I didn't get rid of any important evidence."

"What about the walls?" I ask in an uneasy tone.

"No, they weren't replaced. Fortunately there was almost no blood on them."

"A single blow from a pickaxe, and a knife to the chest that wasn't pulled out. There wouldn't have been too much blood splatter from just those," Sakurako-san says, running her gloved hand across the grey walls.

It's like she's tracing the flow of the blood.

"The father died without knowing what happened to him. It was a swift death, with no escape."

"That's terrible…"

It's such a resolute way to kill someone. Just hearing about it, I can tell how determined and merciless the killer was. He was her father, and her only close relative left, yet she didn't hesitate at all.

"It must have been 'pure hatred' that caused her to do that…"

“No.” Shouko-san shakes her head. “Nori-chan was always calm, I never even heard her raise her voice. She was always reserved and kind, it felt like she was watching over me… I don’t think she hated anyone enough to kill them.”

Then why would she have done that? Shouko-san can’t answer that question.

“But the reality is that two people died. Maybe she was observing you, rather than watching over you. She may have been able to kill her parents so calmly because she never felt emotions like love and affection in the first place. She didn’t have to suppress her emotions to kill them.”

“Huh?”

“There are people in this world who don’t have a conscience. They don’t feel other peoples’ pain, or feel empathy for others. For people who can’t feel another’s pain, murder might not seem horrific or insane.”

“But she was so kind to me!”

“That’s because you were on her side. After the death of your close friend, you bought and protected her house. She just had to pretend in order to win your affection.”

“That’s…”

“Let’s go,” Sakurako-san says to me as she leaves the room, leaving the dumbfounded Shouko-san behind.

I don’t want to just leave her like that, though. She quietly follows after Sakurako-san and leaves the room. Her shoulders are trembling. Can any good really come out of her forcing herself to face the past like this? I’m growing uneasy. Sakurako-san is merciless today.

Sakurako-san looks at my printouts as we advance to the next room. After the home theatre we move to the third floor where the step mother’s room is. The stairs have a surprisingly steep angle, it’s a bit scary. It must have been terrifying going down these while carrying the corpse.

The step mother’s room is quite empty, but tidy. The bed is just a frame, and the closet is empty. The empty bottles of cosmetics on the dresser is the only trace that anyone has been here.

“Her step mother’s family took all of her belongings. The room has gotten quite dirty, too…” Shouko-san mumbles.

After killing Noriyasu-san, the perpetrator went up to Nao-san’s room on the third floor with the pickaxe still in hand. Similar to Noriyasu-san, she was hit from behind. However, this time Nao-san noticed and tried to avoid the attack, so she took a blow to her right shoulder. After that, they fought. Some of Noriko-san’s skin was found under Nao-san’s nails. The criminal pushed Nao-san onto the bed, then struck her through the chest with the pickaxe. The criminal wrapped Nao-san’s body up in the bed sheets and dragged it to the bathroom.

In the bathroom, the criminal cut off the stepmother’s head, arms, and legs. The neighbours testified that at around 11:30am, they heard the stepmother scream just once. The mail carrier visited at around 3pm, and testified that Noriko seemed the same as usual. Since both murders had already occurred by that point, it’s assumed that they were carefully planned in advance.

“So only the stepmother’s body was abandoned… It’s strange.” Sakurako-san mumbles with her arms crossed when we get to the bathroom.

The night of the murder, the stepmother's body was abandoned in the mountains somewhere between Maruyama and Bankei. They found the torso, arms, and legs, but there was one part missing. At around 2am the next morning, Noriko-san committed suicide by hanging herself in the bathroom. Noriyasu-san's body was found lying in the bathtub. When the housekeeper showed up in the morning, they found the corpses one after another.

"Sakurako-san, didn't you say before that people usually cut up corpses so they're easier to dispose of, rather than out of morbid curiosity?"

It would be a lot easier for a lone woman to carry a body if it was cut into pieces.

"Ah, that's right. It's not so strange on its own, but why was the stepmother the only one who was cut up? She could have done the same thing to the father and disposed of the bodies together."

"…Maybe she couldn't bring herself to do it because they're blood relatives?"

"You think a cold hearted killer would care about that?"

The bathroom smells like water and chlorine, rather than a dead body. Our voices echo a bit in here, too. Shouko-san sits at the entrance to the bathroom while Sakurako-san and I talk.

"…Maybe she only wanted to kill her stepmother," Shouko-san says quietly, hugging her knees. "I think the only person Nori-chan considered her 'mom' was her aunt. She couldn't bring herself to like her stepmother, since she stole her 'real mom' from her. She would say that she's fashionable or beautiful as a roundabout way of calling her a spendthrift."

"That's fine, then. You could say she committed suicide because she knew she couldn't hide what she'd done, but then why would she dispose of the stepmother's corpse in the first place? There's too many contradictions."

She murdered her stepmother and her blood-related father. That alone is cruel and terrifying. The feeling of wanting to murder someone is like a disease. People get imprisoned by the desire to kill until they can't help but commit murder. However, it's a crime committed in the throes of madness. It's not something done with logic in mind, but that's just how being human is, right?

"Couldn't it just be because she wasn't thinking rationally?"

"So she killed her parents so meticulously and cleanly, but wasn't thinking?"

"Um, well…"

I don't know how to answer so my eyes start to wander until I notice Shouko-san hunched over, looking pale. I decide to end the conversation.

"Anyway, why don't we have lunch? I'm hungry."

It's lunchtime already. We'll have to leave the house and go out for lunch. I don't really have an appetite, though. I just want to escape from the heavy atmosphere in this house as soon as possible.

Part 4

We decided to go to Shouko-san's favourite Italian restaurant for lunch. The pizza should have been delicious, but honestly, I don't remember what it tasted like. Even though we were only at the Endou house for a couple hours, I feel like it completely drained my energy. I think while drinking my cola from a glass bottle. I want to go home.

"…So, Sacchan, do you think Nori-chan was the culprit after all?"

Shouko-san asks while poking the Caesar salad she's hardly eaten with her fork.

"At the very least, I'm sure she was at the scene of the crime. She was also connected to her step mother's murder. The fact that her skin was found under her step mother's nails is an indisputable fact," Sakurako-san says.

Sakurako-san is eating catalana, and the only one looking happy to be having lunch right now.

"You really think she killed them? I just can't see why she would do that."

No one knows why the actual Lizzie Borden killed her parents, either. They had to just try to come up with any reason they could, like that she was temporarily disoriented from the heat. It's the same in Noriko-san's case, too.

"I see… I just wish I knew what changed with the sweet Nori-chan I knew. If she really killed her parents, she must have had a good reason for doing so."

"Um… Could you tell us a bit about Noriko-san? What kind of family were the Endous? I want to know about the kind Noriko-san that you knew, Shouko-san."

I try to change the subject, since the gloomy atmosphere is starting to get to me. It's too much for me to only ever hear about the tragedy.

"Oh, but if you aren't comfortable with that, you don't have to force yourself…"

"Not at all, I'd like to talk about her."

Shouko-san takes a gulp of her soda water and closes her eyes to think. She looks like she's trying to dredge up some old memories that she's stored away,

"…When we first met, we were both going through some difficult times. For her, she was dealing with her father's remarriage. We ended up opening up to each other eventually. We were both staying in the same school dorm at the time."

Apparently this was back when they were in their first year of middle school. Thinking back to when I was that age, it seems crazy to even consider staying in a dorm away from my mom.

"At the time, I didn't know that she didn't have a mother. Her aunt would come visit her every week. She would bring all kinds of things when she came to visit; handmade sweets, books, western-style clothes… On the other hand, there was no sign of her father. I figured she didn't have one anymore."

However, Noriko-san was hesitant because she wasn't her aunt's actual daughter. From the start, she was always thoughtful, reserved, and well mannered, so she didn't cause any trouble for her aunt.

"I knew her aunt wasn't her mother because Nori-chan called her aunt 'Emi-chan'. Still, I could tell that they had a special bond, even if they weren't mother and daughter."

"But…"

I'm hesitant to finish my thought, but Shouko-san nods in understanding.

"Yes, when Nori-chan was in her second year, her father officially remarried. Since her new mother was coming, her aunt had to move out of the house. I don't know if it was because her stepmother and aunt didn't get along, or if her father just wanted her to think of her stepmother as her real mother."

I guess her father was just trying to improve his relationship with his daughter in his own way. Unfortunately, to Noriko-san, it just seemed like a ridiculous, unnecessary change.

“Her stepmother was likely trying to become her new mother. Nori-chan knew that, but there was a problem. Her father was trying to build a new family without Nori-chan’s aunt there, so her aunt felt like she was having her ‘daughter’ stolen from her.”

“It said online that her father was a very domineering man.”

Shouko-san shakes her head.

“He was strict, but I wouldn’t say he was domineering. He did genuinely worry about Nori-chan. For a while after he got remarried, he still let her aunt visit his house whenever she wanted. That is, until her aunt and stepmother got into a fight one day…”

I already know what they fought about. Apparently they fought because they both thought they had the right to be Noriko-san’s “mother.” I heard that they caused such a disturbance that the neighbours called the police.

“Her stepmother eventually grabbed a kitchen knife. Fortunately nobody was hurt, but her father took her stepmother’s side. It was extremely upsetting for both Nori-chan and her aunt, and her aunt decided to keep her distance from the rest of the family after that.”

On top of that, Noriko-san’s father wanted them to be a tight knit family, so she was banned from meeting with her aunt. She was kept under strict surveillance to make sure she didn’t secretly meet Emiko, her aunt. Noriko-san was obedient to her father, so she was forced to accept it.

“She was afraid that even if she did manage to sneak out and see her aunt, it would cause trouble for her aunt. The Endou family wasn’t the horrific, broken family that people say it was. They might not have been ideal, and they had their problems, but they cared for each other.”

So basically, despite how it turned out, her father did all that out of love.

“Though her strict curfew has been blamed as being the main cause ever since this happened…”

Noriko-san must have been precious to her father, since he didn’t have any other children from his first wife. However, controlling her whole life to that extent, even when she’s 30 years old, is going way too far. How would she ever find a spouse if she’s constantly being watched?

“I felt helpless because there was nothing I could do for her. She even needed permission from her father if she was going to work late. Fortunately for her, as long as she got prior permission, he wasn’t too strict on how late she was.”

Most people think that this tragedy only occurred because Noriko-san’s resentment, loneliness, and unhappiness built up until she couldn’t take it anymore. I’m not so sure about that, though.

“But why did Noriko-san kill her parents? Even if her stress had been building up, something must have happened that day that caused her to snap.”

“Some people say she was influenced by the real Lizzie Borden, but I don’t think hearing about a murder case is enough to make someone kill their own parents,” Sakurako-san says, taking her last bite of catalana. “Then let’s go find out the truth.”

“We’re going back…? Is that okay with you?” I look at Shouko-san, and she nods.

“I’m coming with you. We haven’t figured out what happened yet.”

I glare at Sakurako-san for making Shouko-san force herself, but Sakurako-san pretends not to notice and prepares to head back to the house.

Part 5

"Now then, the main thing to figure out is what caused this incident to happen," Sakurako-san says as she puts on a fresh pair of gloves.

She always turns them inside out as she takes them off, so the dirty part doesn't touch anything. She considers any pair of gloves that have been used before to be dirty. Even during an investigation like this one, she still wants a fresh pair.

"It's likely that Noriko went to her room after eating breakfast that morning. The delivery man said he heard her coming down the stairs, after all," Sakurako-san says, setting her sights on the third floor.

I'm still not used to how steep these stairs are, so I have to follow her slowly and carefully.

"This one was Nori-chan's room."

There are four rooms on the third floor. The father's room, the stepmother's room, Noriko-san's room, and a guest bedroom. Noriko-san's room is the first room you see after climbing the stairs. The stepmother's room is directly across from Noriko-san's.

"This room is pretty big."

That's the first thing that comes to mind as I open the door.

"Yes, it is. Her stepmother's room is quite a bit smaller because it has a walk-in closet. Her stepmother and father would usually share one room anyway, though. The stepmother's room was originally the aunt's room, so Nori-chan had to share a room with her aunt for a while."

"I see…"

So basically, Noriko-san's room was often used by two people. Still, it's a big enough room for that. Unlike the stepmother's room, Noriko-san's room still has most of her belongings left in it. There's even books on the bookshelf.

"Nori-chan wasn't the type of person to buy unnecessary things, so her room is kind of bland." Shouko-san says with a forced smile.

"I wonder if she didn't plan on staying in this house," I mumble.

"What?"

Shouko-san looks at me.

"No, it's just… I just thought it felt like she was always prepared to leave, like staying here was temporary."

She may have just not been attached to material things, but her room feels simple, cold, and minimalistic with no sense of individuality. It feels like there's no presence here. The bookshelves are lined with dictionaries and history books. I heard she was a Japanese history teacher. It doesn't feel like there's anything on the bookshelf for having fun.

"But… I don't think she had anywhere to go."

"Couldn't she have gone to her aunt's house?"

"I don't know. She probably thought about it, but she had no way to contact her aunt."

Shouko-san sits on the bed. Some dust gets kicked up into the air.

"…The police investigated her aunt, as well. They checked all the phone records and everything, but didn't find any indication that the two were in contact. Also… Her aunt died of cancer around the same time as the incident. I heard she had about 3-6 months left to live. The other members of her support group confirmed that she was meeting with them on the day of the incident."

"A support group?"

"Yeah… It was for a group of people to support each other since they're facing similar struggles. They talked about their pain and different treatment methods and everything."

I wonder if her aunt had nobody else to support her while she struggled with illness. She must have felt lonely, if she felt like she needed support from a group instead of her family.

"I heard she was part of a small group of patients with the same type of cancer. It was the only thing keeping her from fighting her disease alone, since her family didn't care about her anymore."

She died a few months after the incident. Noriko-san didn't attend the funeral, of course. I wonder if they died so close together because they felt empty without the other.

"Oh, I forgot to mention, Nori-chan had a hobby," Shouko-san says, walking over to the bookshelf.

She lovingly glides her fingers over the spines of the history books.

"She liked penmanship and calligraphy, but most of all, she was a history buff. She loved the Warring States period."

Shouko-san giggles mischievously. That's a little unexpected. It feels like I'm seeing the human side of Noriko-san for the first time.

"Really? Who was her favourite military commander?"

"Kenshin Uesugi. Apparently she liked how he was stoic and just. I've always been a huge fan of Kanetsugu Naoe, though," Shouko-san adds.

I'm surprised to hear that Shouko-san has a favourite military commander. I wonder if her choice was influenced by Kanetsugu Naoe having the same name as Ariwara-san.

"That's why we were planning to go on a trip to Niigata…" Shouko-san says as her expression grows cloudy.

"Were her parents opposed to the trip?"

"Maybe… I can't deny the possibility."

I'm not sure that would have lead to murderous intent, though.

"Maybe that was the straw that broke the camel's back."

Besides books, there's plenty of writing tools here. There's various different inks, fountain pens, quills, and glass pens. It's easy to see that she enjoyed writing. There doesn't seem to be anything else of note in her room. As I try to leave, Sakurako-san, who's in front of me, stops suddenly.

"Sakurako-san?"

"The step mother's room is on the opposite side."

"That's right."

It's the same room that used to belong to her aunt.

"Her step mother was planning to renovate, and was cleaning up the house. Did Noriko Endou agree to that?"

Shouko-san and I look at each other.

“Now that you mention it, they found the pickaxe that was used as a weapon in the shed while cleaning it a few days prior. Noriko-san had it for the incident because she was supposed to dispose of it.”

That’s what the housekeeper testified.

“Her stepmother must have done something during the clean out.”

“Yeah. There were likely some items related to Noriko Endou’s aunt and birth mother. It’s possible that the stepmother tried to throw them out without consulting her stepdaughter or husband first.”

If that’s true, her stepmother was organising things in the room across from Noriko-san’s on the day of the incident. I wonder how Noriko-san felt seeing that in the room across from her…

“So you’re saying that her insensitivity caused Nori-chan to hate her?“

“Who can say?” Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders.

At least, she’s the kind of person to grab a knife while arguing with Noriko-san’s aunt. She must have had some kind of mental instability or something.

“There isn’t enough evidence to draw a conclusion either way.”

There’s only so much information we can gather from this house. Sakurako-san suggests asking the neighbours about the Endou family. It’s not like we have any other leads to go off of.

“Whoops!” Sakurako-san loses her balance while walking down the stairs.

I grab her arm before she falls. She turns back and smiles at me.

“Are you okay?”

“Thank you.”

How can she still smile in a situation like this? Shouko-san gets a phone call, so she hurries out the front door to take it.

“…Can’t you be a little nicer to Shouko-san?” I ask Sakurako-san while I tie my shoes.

“She doesn’t want the truth.”

“Hm?”

“It’s fine as long as she’s satisfied with the conclusion.”

“That’s why you don’t have to say things that would hurt her!”

I’m angry, but I have to stifle my voice so Shouko-san doesn’t hear. Sakurako-san looks displeased with me.

“She’s an intelligent woman, so she isn’t as easily deceived as you are. She’s thought about this tragedy over and over again, so she just wants an answer she can be happy with. It’s good enough if I’m the only one who knows the truth.”

We can’t change what happened in the past, but we can make it easier on Shouko-san now. I want to help heal her old wounds just as much as Sakurako-san does, but will that really convince her?

“Then what do you think happened, Sakurako-san?”

“It was the work of a demon.”

“A demon?”

I’m taken aback at how unlike her that sounds.

“Could you ever bash your parents’ heads in with a pickaxe like that? Well, in your case it would be your mom and grandpas.”

“There’s no way I could do that!”

“Then it’s an easy conclusion to make. The culprit was someone who could do that.”

Sakurako-san follows Shouko-san out of the house as soon as she’s done talking. After being left alone in the house, I feel a shiver run down my spine. I hurry out the door before I even tie my other shoelace.

“Oh, that’s a lovely dog. I actually have a Samoyed at home, too. How did you get its fur to look so nice? Do you feed it something special?”

I notice Sakurako-san talking to a woman on the other side of the street. The woman is walking a Samoyed. Sakurako-san looks back at me, then continues her conversation while I walk over. The other woman looks cautious at first, but then tells Sakurako-san about the homemade dog food she makes, and a nice brush she uses.

The Samoyed’s name is Woody, and even though he’s the same breed as Hector, he has a more masculine looking face. While I’m petting Woody and a gorgeous dog named Matilda-san (who I later found out was an afghan hound) a woman walking a very round French bulldog stops to chat. After a while, a woman walking a huge Bernese mountain dog named Maro-kun joins in. The woman asks Sakurako-san and I what we’re doing around here.

“Actually, I was looking into buying the house over there, but I heard there was a big incident there a while ago.”

It seems like we’re finally getting to the point. The women instantly look nervous, and glance around at each other.

Contrary to her high class appearance, Matilda-san is actually very friendly. She might even like being pet more than Hector. She’s at war with Kintarou-kun, the French bulldog, over which one gets to sit on my lap. Woody looked indifferent at first, but once I scratched behind his ears, he started to smile.

There’s a strange sense of community between dog owners. I can feel it really strongly when I take Hector for walks. It’s like there’s a sense of unity between people who have dogs. I guess that’s why Sakurako-san went after people who had dogs with them. The women fold and start talking about the incident.

“The homeowner’s daughter was a nice girl. I used to see her on walks with her aunt sometimes. She didn’t speak much, only ever answering with ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but she had good manners.”

The woman with Woody and Matilda-san says. Apparently she lives 5 houses down. Once she starts talking about the incident, the other women seem more open about adding their thoughts.

“You’re right. Noriko-chan was a quiet and reserved girl. She was elegant and refined, which is why the whole incident was so shocking…”

“She was a teacher at my daughter’s school. Apparently the students liked her because she was the assistant teacher for the second years and she never scolded them. I got the impression that she was fairly isolated, and didn’t have many friends.”

Kintarou-kun and Maro-kun’s owners (who I shall now refer to as Kintarou-mama and Maro-mama) say.

“You know, I think it’s because Emiko-san left. I think it was pretty cruel of her to do that. She was a bright, friendly, fun person. After she left, it was harder to talk to the Endou family.”

“Besides, he got remarried to a flashy, young woman. I felt bad for Noriko-chan. She must have been lonely. I wish he had asked her about it beforehand.”

Unlike Matilda-mama, it seems that Maro-mama and Kintarou-mama have lived here for a long time, so they’re merciless. Regardless of what happened, she’s still defending Noriko-san.

“The media said a lot of different things, but Noriko-chan might have been the real victim. She was a serious girl, and always seemed to be worrying over something.”

From there, their conversation took off like a wildfire, so we said our thanks and escaped. Shouko-san, who had been standing a bit away from us, sighs with relief.

I’m surprised that everyone said the same thing. Noriko-chan was a good girl, nobody could believe that she’d done that… I wonder what Sakurako-san thinks of this. She visits one of the neighbouring houses and talks to the person inside for a bit. Most of the people we visit are wary of us, but some are enthusiastic to talk to someone about Noriko-san. I gradually start to feel depressed the more people we talk to. Shouko-san is just following behind us, hardly saying anything.

We finally reach the last house. It looks brand new. It’s completely black, so it must be one of those designer houses that are popping up. We ring the doorbell and lie to them about buying the Endou house. We must look like a single mother and her son to them.

“Oh…”

“Umm… What is it?”

I’m at a loss for words. This person has the unmistakable red face and bloodshot eyes of someone who was crying.

“Sorry, were you in the middle of doing something?”

“No…”

“We wanted to ask you about the Endou house.” Sakurako-san takes over, since I don’t know what to say.

“Endou-san?” She looks confused. “Oh! The house where that murder happened!”

She remembers before we can explain it to her, but she shakes her head.

“I’m sorry, we haven’t lived here for very long.”

“Shiba?”

A man inside the house seems to be calling for the woman we’re talking to.

“O-oh, but Kawachi-san lives nearby and has lived here for a long time, so you might want to ask her. Thank you for stopping by!”

She suddenly grabs a ballpoint pen out of a shoebox.

“This is how you write Kawachi-san.”

“…Huh?”

“It’s the house right across from here, you can’t miss it.”

The woman, who is apparently named Shiba, writes the name across my hand.

“Um…”

I’m pretty sure I could find the place without having it written on my hand. I don’t have time to say anything before she dismisses us.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing…”

What a weird person. My palm hurts from how hard she pushed on the pen. We visit the house that's written on my hand, but nobody is home.

"Well, we take take our time with this investigation. It's not like the dead will get impatient."

It's already after 4pm. We have to head back to Asahikawa soon. I know that even the police couldn't make much progress in their investigation, but I'm disappointed that we didn't discover anything yet. Even without finding anything, I'm still exhausted.

Sakurako-san and I don't say much on the drive home. Shouko-san decided to stay in Sapporo for now. I doze off while staring at the black ink on my hand, but I end up having a nightmare. I don't remember what happened in my dream, but my heart is pounding so hard that it hurts. At least the pain is telling me that I'm still alive.

Part 6

I'm too distracted to pay attention in class. I'm in a bad mood from feeling tired and bored. It's frustrating to go back to my ordinary, everyday life after spending all day yesterday at a murder scene.

"Oh, you're awake?"

"Yeah, somehow."

After third block, Azechi points out my messy hair, probably from laying my head on my desk.

"Did you catch a cold or something? Are you okay?"

At least Kougami is being nice to me. Azechi starts playing with my hair, apparently assuming I won't resist.

"No, I'm just tired."

"Tired?"

"Yeah, especially mentally."

"You? Mentally exhausted?"

Azechi laughs while she ties her black, lace ribbon.

"…What's so funny?"

I don't think it's just my hair.

"I just didn't expect you to complain so shamelessly."

"Thank you very much for insulting me directly to my face."

"You're welcome."

If we're talking about shameless people, she's definitely more shameless than I am. I have just enough patience to not say anything. Apparently she's done with my hair now, since she steps away. Kougami bursts out laughing as soon as she sees me. Azechi suddenly grabs my wrist.

"W-what?"

"…Tatewaki, is someone hurting you?"

"What? Hurting me?"

What's she talking about? I give Azechi a puzzled look. Behind her goth makeup, I can see in her eyes that she's genuinely worried.

“Are you involved with something you can’t talk about again?” Kougami asks anxiously after noticing how serious Azechi is.

“That’s not it. What are you talking about so suddenly!”

Azechi forces my hand open while I’m still bewildered.

“The black dots.”

“Hm?”

“These marks.”

“What about them?”

“You’re sure nothing happened? That’s fine, but… I was really worried. Don’t be so misleading.” Azechi seems to be in a bad mood now. I look at my hand.

The black marks weren’t washed off in the shower. It’s more faded than it was yesterday, but the spot where Shiba-san wrote on me is still visible.

“Does that spot on the palm mean something?” Kougami, who seems to have had the same question as me, asks.

“Yeah, it’s called the Black Dot Campaign. It originated on social media in England, but the practice has slowly been spreading. It’s a sign for people who are suffering due to domestic violence to subtly ask for help.”

“…Huh?”

“It would be a problem if your partner found out you were openly asking for help. That’s why you’re supposed to secretly draw dots on your palm then upload it to social media. Then someone will notice it. It takes a crazy amount of courage for victims of violence like that to take action.”

“Azechi…”

“Of course there’s the possibility of the abuser noticing the dot, but I think it’s best if there’s plenty of ways to ask for help. I’ve seen statistics that say that 1 in 20 women in Japan have felt like their life is in danger because of their partner. So Yuriko, you and Tatewaki should both take action if you see something like that,” Azechi concludes.

“Th… Thank you.”

“Hm?”

I’d never heard of it until now. I give her my gratitude, then hurriedly send an email to Sakurako-san.

“…Kougami?”

This time it’s Kougami that suddenly grabs my arm.

“You’re absolutely sure that nothing happened today?”

“Yeah. I’m completely fine.”

It’s true, there’s nothing wrong with me. Kougami nods and takes out a red pen from my pencil case.

“Then if you ever need help, draw a mark like this and show it to us. The colour doesn’t matter, but I seriously want you to remember. Tatewaki-kun, I know that sometimes you’re worried about things you can’t talk about. In times like that, you don’t need to bear it alone. Ask for help. You don’t need to say the reason.”

Kougami draws a red mark on the opposite side of my left hand from the black mark. The pen point is small, so it hurts. She must be feeling a similar pain.

“Tatewaki-kun, you found my grandma. You connected Sakurako-san and I. You’ve done so much for me, so I want you to be able to depend on me, as well. We’re friends, right? …No,” Kougami says, but then shakes her head.

She lets go of my hand, but I can still feel the heat of her palms.

“You’re secretly my best friend.”

“…Yeah.”

She’s mine, too. Thank you, Kougami. She smiles and nods. The red mark she left behind is a symbol of her kindness, but that’s exactly why I feel like I should never use this mark. Even if I did, would they be able to do anything? They’re precious to me, I absolutely don’t want to involve them in anything.

I go home as soon as I can after school. I tell my mom that there’s going to be a small party at the Kujou house. My mom looks doubtful, but she still says I can go, and even stay out late if I want. Honestly, I didn’t think Sakurako-san would cooperate when I told her about the black dot. Fortunately, she agrees to take me to Sapporo. There’s something I need to do there. I know I’m being reckless, but I feel a little excited. I’m not excited because I’m having fun, but more because the energy in the air feels different.

We head straight to Shiba-san’s house. Shiba-san looks completely surprised when she sees us again. I was worried she would be covered in bruises or something, but fortunately that’s not the case. But looks can be misleading. Abusers usually try to leave marks where other people won’t see them.

“Sorry to bother you, but we couldn't find the house you mentioned yesterday.”

I pull out a paper with a simple map drawn on it.

“Is this it?”

I point to the words “do you need help?” written on the paper. She stares at the paper for a while… Then she looks to the ground. There’s a pair of shoes for a small child in the entrance. She hesitates for a few moments. I wonder what she’s thinking about right now. She has a beautiful home, nice clothes, and a child… It seems like a perfect life at a glance. She looks at me, full of determination.

“…Yes.”

It must have taken all her courage to say that one word. We leave Shiba-san’s house and call the police.

The police arrive pretty quickly. We explained the details beforehand, so their work goes smoothly. I watch the police work while the sun starts to set.

“I hope she’s safe now.”

I wonder if I just made things worse? I’m feeling anxious.

“No one should be controlled by violence. No, even without violence, people shouldn’t control or dominate others at all,” Sakurako-san says.

She’s right. Still, I want to wish for her safety.

Society is full of violence, so there’s already far too many victims. As we watch the police take the man away from the safety of Sakurako-san’s car, someone suddenly knocks on the window.

“Shouko-san?”

I just about had a heart attack, but it turns out it’s just Shouko-san.

“I brought the thing you asked me to pick up.”

“Thank you, I just needed to see it as soon as possible..”

She gets into the back seat and holds out a large, brown envelope. Sakurako-san takes it and whistles. The address for professor Shitara’s university is written on it. This must be the reason Sakurako-san wanted to go to Sapporo.

“Oh!”

In the light coming from the headlights, I can see the silhouette of a person walking past the Endou house. It’s a woman with pure white hair. For some reason, I intuitively feel like it’s Kawachi-san, the person Shiba-san told us about.

“Want to go see?”

Apparently Sakurako-san thought the same thing as me. We get out of the car and visit the Kawachi house.

It’s a fairly big, one story house. The house itself looks pretty old, but there’s a beautifully maintained Japanese-style garden. When we visited before, nobody was home. I wonder if she’s outside because she’s worried about the police being at Shiba-san’s house.

“Are you Kawachi-san?”

“Yes?”

She looks at us suspiciously from behind her dark green glasses.

“Oh, it’s you!” She instantly brightens up when she sees Shouko-san. “You sometimes go over to visit Endou-san, don’t you?”

“Um….”

Shouko-san looks taken aback.

“Oh right, they’re already gone…” Kawachi-san mumbles. Shouko-san nods politely.

Kawachi-san stares blankly at the lights on the police cars.

“It’s a bit noisy. You can come to my house, since nobody else will be there. Have you all had dinner already?”

“Oh, um, don’t worry about it.”

As you’d expect, I feel a bit awkward about suddenly intruding on them. We exchanged troubled glances. Kawachi-san narrows her eyes at us.

“It’s no trouble for me. Rather, I’m worried I’m bothering you all by having you keep an old lady like me company. I’m just a lonely old woman without much longer to live. Think of spending time with me as volunteer work.”

I wonder how old she is. She must be about 80 or so, I think. It’s hard to refuse after what she said. In the end, we all go over to Kawachi-san’s house. We’re welcomed by three cats meowing at us.

“I have 9 cats right now. It’s hard for me to take in new little ones now, but this year I’m looking after one temporarily,” she explains as she shows us to the living room.

I can see a large, lovely garden, but the house itself seems lonely. After a lot of back and forth, we end up having grilled eel and rice boxes delivered. I wonder if Sakurako-san will eat eel. When Kawachi-san tells us that there’s some baumkuchen to have as tea snacks, Sakurako-san looks incredibly elated.

“It’s for after the meal,” Kawachi-san reminds her.

“So… The police were there…” Kawachi-san mumbles while she prepares some tea.

“It seems like her husband was abusing her.”

“Yes, I’m glad.” Kawachi-san breathes a sigh of relief. “I thought that was the case… But I wasn’t sure, and it’s not easy to confirm… I was worried I would only make things worse again,” Kawachi-san mumbles her excuses.

It’s true that you have to be careful, since someone on the outside looking in could easily misunderstand the situation.

“What do you mean by that?” Sakurako-san suddenly interjects.

“I just…”

“Do you know something about Noriko Endou?”

Kawachi-san drops the lid from her teapot. Her face is white as a sheet. Sakurako-san holds out the envelope she got earlier.

Part 7

Nobody but us should have seen what was in that envelope. No, even I shouldn’t have seen it. It’s the record from Noriko-san’s autopsy.

Noriko Endou, 38 years old, female. Everything from her height and weight, to the condition of her corpse is listed in there. Every single detail of her body is enclosed in that envelope. But that’s only because every detail is important. Every single minute detail says more than 1000 words.

“Noriko Endou, cause of death: hanging. She hanged herself from the shower curtain rod in the bathroom. Due to the atypical nature of the hanging, this was investigated very carefully. The possibility of murder should be fully considered.”

The only traces left on Noriko-san’s body indicated suicide, not murder. After killing both her parents and hiding her step mother’s body, she committed suicide next to her father’s corpse.

“But that’s not what I’m interested in.”

Sakurako-san flips through the record until she finds a sheet with X-ray images on it.

“These are… signs of a bone fracture?” She says while pointing.

“Exactly. Her body had a number of areas that indicated fracture, such as her humeral diaphysis and ribs. There were also some fairly old scars.”

“Oh!” Shouko-san shouts.

“I know about that. She broke a few bones while she was in elementary school. I remember being surprised that she had such a careless side to her when she told me about it. I’m positive I’m remembering correctly.”

Kawachi-san, who is next to Shouko-san, stays silent.

“In elementary school… Do you know when? The exact year?”

“I don’t know that much…”

“It was when she was in grades 4 and 6.” It’s Kawachi-san, not Shouko-san, who answers Sakurako-san’s question.

“I see, just as I thought.” Sakurako-san tightly closes her eyes. “It’s not uncommon for children to have a fractured humerus on its own. Supracondylar fractures of the humerus in particular are extremely common in young children. When the child falls off playground equipment, the arm is often the first part of the body to hit the ground. However, breaks in the

central part of the humerus are a different story. These fractures are usually only caused by large amounts of force being applied to the upper arm."

Since I'm sitting next to her, Sakurako-san grabs my arm. She runs her hand down my humerus, then tightly squeezes the middle of my upper arm. It's true that it doesn't seem like it would break easily.

"Then there's the ribs. Rib fractures certainly seem common enough, but it's a bit different with children. Injuries in children are usually located at the joints and outside of the body."

That's right, my older brother broke his ankle once a long time ago.

"This is in contrast to cases of abuse where the injuries are concentrated toward the inside of the body. Places you can't see. The chest, under armpits, the abdomen, the back - and most commonly, fractures to the ribs. Statistics show that 70% of cases where children have multiple rib fractures, it's due to abuse."

70 percent… Shouko-san lets out an astonished gasp.

"She had 8 broken ribs. And it was continuous. Of course I can't deny that there's a chance she had other circumstances or it was just a coincidence. However, even in that case, shouldn't we suspect abuse?"

"Then… you're saying Nori-chan's father…" Shouko-san asks, trembling. Sakurako-san shakes her head.

The cat Sakurako-san had been petting on her lap meows. Sakurako-san lets out a deep sigh.

"The police may not have noticed this at the time. Did she talk to anyone about her injuries in elementary school? Since she stopped getting hurt in middle school, it's likely that there was someone taking care of her as a child who was hurting her."

My stomach hurts just from thinking about it.

"Then… Are you… Are you saying her aunt was abusing her?" Kawachi-san says in a frail, scared voice.

"Poor Nori-chan… She had such a rough childhood. Her mom died, her aunt hurt her, and her dad thought of her as a bother… Yet she was such a sweet girl." Kawachi-san covers her face as she starts to cry.

Sakurako-san shakes her head slowly and expressionlessly.

"I believe Noriko Endou had an antisocial personality disorder. She didn't have a conscience. In that case, she wouldn't have cared about lying or killing someone. It's also possible that she was raised her whole life not to think for herself, and only listen to her aunt. It's not uncommon in children who are abused."

Even though everyone said she was calm, reserved, gentle, and meek… I feel dizzy just thinking about it.

"Wait! Are you saying Nori-chan didn't really love her aunt?! She asked me for help because she was so distraught when she couldn't see her aunt anymore!"

"I've heard that the brains of abused children produce more corticosteroids than normal, which interrupts normal brain development. It's theorised that it's to block outside information from the brain to protect the child. It's similar to how cult leaders control their victims. Unfortunately, many children try to protect their abusive family members because they still love them."

“No way…” Shouko-san slumps over in her seat, clearly distraught.

“No, it’s just as you said… I saw it happen all the time. I saw that person hit Nori-chan, and said all kinds of horrible things to her,” Kawachi-san says through tears.

She starts to tell us about the hidden side of Noriko-san’s childhood.

It was Kawachi-san who first noticed that Noriko-san was being abused. Kawachi-san got a bad feeling from Emiko-san, even though she was respectful and well liked by everyone.

“Well, no matter who you are, you can’t please everyone. I just felt like she always told people exactly what they wanted to hear, even if she didn’t believe a word of what she was saying,” Kawachi-san says.

Whether what Kawachi-san says is true or not, it’s highly likely that Emily-san was abusing Noriko-san.

It all started with a bad feeling. Kawachi-san noticed that Noriko-san was always polite to adults because she was scared of them. She had never seen Noriko-san run around and play outside. Noriko-san would only respond to her aunt with “yes” or “no” like a robot with no thoughts of her own.

“I started watching her every day after that.”

Whenever Noriko-san’s father wasn’t around, Kawachi-san would hear Emiko-san shouting things like, “you’re a fat pig!” Noriko-san was tall and slender, the furthest thing from a “fat pig.” Emiko was trying to control Noriko-san to match her every whim. No matter what she did, Emiko-san continued to hurl abuse at Noriko-san, so Kawachi-san went to the girl’s father.

Noriyasu didn’t believe it at first, but came around once Noriko-san suffered from broken ribs. Once Noriko-san was in middle school, he sent her to a boarding school so she could get away from her aunt.

“Unfortunately, Endou-san didn’t know how to be a good father. He brought home a new mother that he met in Susukino for Nori-chan.” (Note: Susukino is a red light district in Sapporo.)

His new wife, Nao, wasn’t a bad person, but she was too young to be a mother to Noriko-san. It’s not that she didn’t show any love to her step daughter, but she just couldn’t give her what she needed.

“I don’t know what ended up happening. I’m not sure what would have been better, either. That’s all I know… Still, I wonder if Nori-chan would have been happier with Emiko. Or maybe I should have contacted the police and adopted that girl from her parents…”

It’s my fault.

Kawachi-san forces those words out from the back of her throat.

“I’m the reason the worst happened. I’m the one who created Lizzie Borden that day.”

Shouko-san curls her shoulders in. A cat meows as Sakurako-san removes it from her lap.

“It’s not your fault. Lizzie Borden was created by a demon,” Sakurako-san says, and holds out her hand to Shouko-san. “Let’s go to Noriko’s house one more time. This time I’ll uncover the demon’s true identity.”

Part 8

No matter how many times I come here, the Endou house feels oppressive. It feels like there's an invisible darkness looming here.

"It's just because of the low ceiling. Don't worry about it."

"Huh?"

Did I look that scared? Sakurako-san gives me a mischievous look while we take off our shoes.

"It's true that a demon resided in the Endou house. However, it wasn't an unscientific being. It was undeniably a human being. They were an immoral person with no sense of ethics, and had no conscience. They, like me, had a hard time understanding people, and lived according to their desires," Sakurako-san says while she runs up the stairs, laughing for a reason I don't understand. "However, in my case, I had people who accepted and guided me, like Ms. Shouko. There are people who will think of me, and embrace me in my life. I may not understand the hearts of others yet, but I try my best… However, Emiko Endou didn't."

Sakurako-san throws open the door to Noriko-san's room and asks, "did she have any hobbies? Did the two of them share any interests? Even something she got interested in after her aunt was out of her life is fine."

"I don't know if they both liked it, but… Nori-chan was really into calligraphy. She started in middle school, and even made her own website about it.

"There were no signs that she was in contact with her aunt over email or phone, right? Could they maybe have communicated through that website?" I ask.

Shouko-san shakes her head.

"The police did a thorough investigation on her aunt. There was nothing suspicious about her internet usage. Unless you think there was some meaning behind her silent videos of her practising calligraphy?"

"Emiko Endou had a firm grip on Noriko. She poisoned her mind, little by little. She was groomed to hate her father and stepmother, and to love her aunt. Her parents tried to cut her off with a strict curfew, but she was over 20 years old and had her own job. She could have deceived her father as much as she wanted."

Those two must have been in contact with each other. Sakurako-san hands Shouko-san the files.

"This is a practice piece she wrote, but it's all just numbers and letters. It doesn't make much sense on its own."

3737167534473416
123345332575
24341417
543754
16756426

I grab the paper from the top of the stack. It really is just a list of numbers. There doesn't seem to be a pattern. Sakurako-san looks at it and whistles.

"Was this also published on her website?"

“Um, probably…”

Sakurako-san laughs.

“Get me a pen and paper!”

Shouko-san and I search through the drawers for the items Sakurako-san asked for. Eventually, I find a pencil case in the closet. I take a pencil out and hand it to Sakurako-san. She jots down an 8x8 grid and fills in the 7 times tables.

“What’s the chart for?” I ask.

Sakurako-san grins wider. She looks like she’s having fun.

“It’s a secret code. It’s a type of substitution cipher commonly called the Uesugi Cipher! Kenshin Uesugi was a war tactician.”

“Uesugi cipher… Oh!”

I remember now. Noriko-san liked Kenshin Uesugi. She was a history teacher, too. It’s no wonder she knows about cryptography.

“At first glance it seems like an incomprehensible list of numbers, but if you notice, there’s no numbers above 7.”

This kind of code has the number for the horizontal position, then the number for the vertical position. Realising the purpose of the chart, we all shiver.

Second of July
6pm
Sapporo station
South
Glass

“July 2nd, 6pm, Sapporo Station, South glass…”

I can’t believe it. It really spelled something.

“There’s a glass Apia dome at the square by Sapporo Station’s South entrance. We used to meet there a lot. July 2nd… That would be 3 days before her birthday. That was the year of the incident. I went out for a meal with her at 7pm. She must have gotten permission from her father to stay out late…”

“I’m sure there wasn’t just one, but many ways the two of them got in touch with each other. If she only met with her aunt on days when she was meeting a friend, her father wouldn’t find out.”

Sakurako-san quickly heads toward the stairs. She joyfully rushes down them while gently sliding her hand down the railing.

“I want to know something! Did this wall and railing get her step mother’s blood on it? Was it dirtied?”

Shouko-san’s expression distorts.

“No, it didn’t get on most of the room. Mostly just the bed. The railing didn’t get any on it. The police who investigated it said there was no reaction indicating blood on the wall.”

“Hahaha! I see. Come over here then, boy.”

“Why?”

Sakurako-san runs up the stairs again and calls for me.

“Can you hold me?”

“What?”

“Do it however you want, just try to carry me down the stairs.”

“…”

I gulp.

“Come on!” Sakurako-san grabs my hand before I can even think.

Oh well, I guess I’ll just go for it.

“You might get hurt if you fall!” I’m just making up any excuse I can at this point.

I lift Sakurako-san up, and carry her over my shoulder, like she’s a bag of rice or something.

“It’s dangerous, so hold on tight!”

“An unreasonable request, considering a corpse can’t do anything.” Sakurako-san complains that I’m hurting her stomach, but she seems like she’s having fun.

“Make sure you don’t slip! This is really dangerous!”

It’s really hard to carry someone down a staircase, especially one this steep. I try to hold onto the railing, but then I realise why she’s making me do this in the first place.

“…There were no blood stains on the wall or railing…?”

“That’s right. Even if she was used to using these stairs every day, it would be too difficult to carry a corpse down them, especially without touching the railing.”

I put Sakurako-san back on the ground.

“Noriko Endou was definitely in the house that day. Her stepmother seemed to have fought back before she was killed. Maybe she was holding her stepmother down so she couldn’t get away. The proof of that is that Noriko Endou’s skin was under her stepmother’s fingernails, but that doesn’t mean Noriko was the one with the pickaxe.”

“…!”

Shouko-san puts her hand to her mouth. Those are the words she’s been waiting to hear for 10 years.

“Emiko learned one day that she didn’t have much longer to live. When faced with one’s own death, nearly everyone wonders ‘why me?’ She was angry that she was dying, so she directed that anger to the people around her. Her brother and his wife were prime targets, since they kicked her out of their house. She made a plan, and used her niece who couldn’t say no to her.”

Noriko-san made the preparations. She prepared the weapon, and brought her aunt over. The reason she seemed out of breath when the delivery man arrived was probably because she thought it was her aunt.

“It’s sad, isn’t it? Noriko was in an unusually good mood, so she chatted with the delivery man. She was so excited, so elated. The demon who controls her was visiting!”

Then the incident occurred. Her father and step mother were killed. The murder weapon didn’t have any traces of Emiko’s blood on it. She held down the struggling woman. Naturally, Noriko-san wouldn’t be able to transport the body on her own, so they wrapped it in the sheets and carried it together.

“Then they chopped up and disposed of the woman who drove her out of the house. Perhaps it was simply out of hatred. Perhaps she enjoyed seeing her niece dismember someone. She’d turned her niece into the perfect puppet!”

I feel sick just imagining it. However my reason comes back, telling me to move over and support the pale Shouko-san who looks like she's about to faint. I put my hands on her shoulders. She lets out a sob, and clings to my chest.

"Emiko's own death was her greatest weapon. She may have used her death as a shield, and forced her niece to commit the crime, then had her commit suicide. 'I'm going to die soon, so let's die together,' may be how she invited Noriko to hang herself… That could be how Lizzie Borden of the Heisei era was born."

"But… Emiko-san should have an alibi. Didn't several people testify that they were with her?"

The other members of the support group she attended testified that she was there. Sakurako-san's reasoning is sound, but the mystery of her alibi remains.

"They're people who share the same pain, and are desperately trying to protect their light that is burning out. She could have said that the police were accusing her to get them to help. Emiko was evil. It was a small group, it's possible she could manipulate them, as well. The answer to your question is strong bonds."

"Would it really go that smoothly, though? No matter how you look at it, they're accomplices in a murder."

"They may not have known they were accomplices. If they really believed what she said and thought she was innocent, that would give them even more reason to band together. For a manipulator like Emiko, it would've been easy. Surely they didn't have long left to live, either. Even if her alibi was a lie, there's no one left to testify to that."

That's right. After all, nobody from this story is still alive. No one who was involved is living. Only Shouko-san, a bystander, remains.

"Will that suffice? Is this the truth you wanted?"

Shouko-san doesn't answer. She sits at the bottom of the stairs and cries.

Final part

"So the aunt was the real criminal after all?"

Sakurako-san and I are at the food court near the station, about a week after the Sapporo incident.

"Seems like it. I just connected the fragments left behind, though. I can't say for sure whether or not I was correct. In fact, it's still unclear why the real Lizzie Borden suddenly turned violent." Sakurako-san says while she eats some ice cream.

It's pretty hot out today.

"In the end, it's just a likely scenario. The police won't do anything at this point. If you want to get the story out there, I'd suggest writing a book." Sakurako-san snickers, even though there's nothing to laugh at.

"…It's not like you to not follow up on something like this, Sakurako-san. You always want to tie up loose ends, don't you?"

That question has been spinning in my head ever since that day. Her reasoning is plausible. I'm sure everything played out exactly as she suggested, but there's too many

assumptions and guesses. She carefully cleaned and assembled this case, even more so than her skeletal specimens.

"…It's fine if I'm just overthinking it, but I've been curious about your answer."

Sakurako-san hesitates and looks troubled.

"They never found the head of the stepmother, Nao Endou. They might not have hit her over the head with the pickaxe. There wasn't any evidence that she suffered a fatal head wound."

"Oh…"

I feel a chill run up my spine.

"I know I said it's relatively common for murderers to dismantle their victims, but only the stepmother's body was cut up and disposed of. Why do you think she would do that?"

"I thought the same thing. I just can't think of a reason why she would do that. Even if she hated her stepmother, it's too big of a risk to take the corpse away."

"That's right, but what if the original purpose was the stepmother's head? No matter how intelligent someone is, they can still be manipulated. It could be that Noriko wasn't the only one being controlled."

A bloodthirsty killer who controls others and steals the heads of their victims… I notice the shadow of a butterfly flying above us.

"It would be presumptuous to try to connect any of this to Hanabusa, as we don't have any good evidence. Just be vigilant. You shouldn't be concerned with this matter anymore. He obviously targets people who are easy to manipulate, but he seems to have a preference for people with economic power. This was true for Noriko and Madoka Hitoe. There may be a financial aspect to his victims."

Shouko-san decided to let go of Noriko-san's house. Anyway, it should all be over now. It definitely feels like Phantom is close to us. Sakurako-san agrees, as well. Is this really connected? There's something bothering me about it.

"But aren't rules important to serial killers? He seeks out criminals, doesn't he? I don't think Noriko-san was a criminal."

"She could have done something we don't know about, but it's just something to consider. However Noriko Endou, Satsuki Usubuchi, and Madoka Hitoe each had their own stories. They each had the knowledge and motive to become criminals, but they would never have crossed that line if it wasn't for Hanabusa."

The chocolate ice cream with marshmallows is sweet. Sakurako-san speaks in an uninterested tone while scooping at her ice cream. The white marshmallows contrast with the nearly black ice cream.

"Anyway, being a bad person who kills bad people is just what someone claiming to be Hanabusa told you. We can't be sure that's really his rule. There may be other rules, as well. You can't let your fear of Hanabusa control you."

I feel like she's using a roundabout way to say that I'm stupid. But Sakurako-san has never had a direct conversation with Phantom. I… I can't help but feel like there's truth deep within Phantom's words. He has a sense of justice that he wants to uphold, even if it goes against the law.

“Or… maybe something important happened and now he’s changing his rules? He was just a murderer before, but now he has a belief he wants to protect. Maybe something happened after he met Hitoe and the others.”

Sakurako-san slams her cafe latte onto the table and scowls at me.

“Really? Don’t start thinking there’s justice in killing people. You almost died while trying to handle things on your own last time. What are you going to do if he gets control of you?”

“I… I would never commit murder, even if he brainwashed me. I’m a coward. Even if I had a reason, I’d be too scared to kill someone.”

Sakurako-san laughs. It’s annoying to be laughed at, especially when it’s true. It’s not just that I have an aversion to death. I would never be able to live with myself knowing what I did to that person’s family and the victim’s own happiness. I wouldn’t be able to stand it knowing how I disappointed my mom and grandpas. There’s nothing I fear more than upsetting my grandpas.

“Well, whatever. The case with the Endou family is all in the past. Lizzie Borden is dead. It’s a good thing Noriko disappeared before she could bring any harm to Ms. Shouko. I’d never let anyone taint her,” Sakurako-san says, ending our conversation.

I guess she doesn’t want to discuss that case anymore. I know she’s worried about me, but…

“It’s ‘a good thing’…? Did we both hear the same story of Noriko-san’s childhood? Obviously I don’t think it’s a reason to commit a crime, but how could you say something so horrible about a person who was manipulated into it?!”

“So you think any crime can be forgiven as long as the criminal didn’t enjoy it? I don’t think death is ever a just choice, but sometimes you have to make difficult decisions,” Sakurako-san says in a soothing voice to try to calm me down.

She finishes her ice cream, then hands me the empty cone. She stretches out her hand to help me up.

“…Let’s go. And don’t make that face, it’s not like I enjoy fighting with you.”

“…”

I don’t like fighting with her either, but I have this muggy feeling in my chest. I start eating her leftover cone while we leave the food court. While we’re waiting for the crosswalk sign to change, someone calls out “Kujou-san!”

It’s an older lady, walking carefully so she doesn’t bump the stroller she’s pushing around. Her sharp chin and eyes remind me of Shouko-san. Her pale blue-green kimono is the same colour as the sky is right now.

She’s Kimiko Toudou, Shouko-san’s grandmother. I met her about a year ago when Seijirou-san, the head of the Toudou family, died from illness. Kimiko-san tells us about how Nanako-san, the family’s servant, safely had her and Seijirou-san’s baby. There was a hidden truth behind what happened that night. She was taking care of Seijirou-san, and had poisoned him with digitalis, knowing it was incompatible with his heart medication. It was indirect murder. It made it a slow, drawn-out death. I was shocked when I heard the truth. Besides that, I was scared- no, angry. Not at Kimiko, but at Sakurako-san.

“I asked Hariti for mercy countless times. Motherhood can be scary and surprising at times. Women become rakshasi for the sake of their children. I’m sure that even your mother

would become a demon to protect you. Maybe Emiko Endou murdered her brother because he ‘stole’ her niece from her.”

We say goodbye to Kimiko-san, Nanako-san and her baby, who are going to visit Shouko-san. Sakurako-san starts walking towards the mall as if nothing happened, so I chase after her.

“Where are you going?”

Sakurako-san stops walking away and turns to look at me, clearly displeased about stopping in the summer heat.

“I know Kimiko-san turned into a rakshasi to protect a child, like Hariti did…. But what about you?”

“What?” Sakurako-san looks confused.

I can’t bring myself to make eye contact right now, so I look at the ground.

“I’ve been wondering this whole time…. On the roof of the high school, you didn’t let go of my hand. Nazuna-san could have died.”

“If I had let go, you would have fallen. Both of you were safe in the end. Is there a problem with that?”

“You can only say that in hindsight.”

“Let’s say I let go, you grabbed his hand, and both of you fell. If Utsumi and the others weren’t ready yet, both of you would have been a stain on the ground. He chose to die, but you would have been an unnecessary casualty.”

Sakurako-san sounds shocked. I feel like I’m about to cry.

“…You could have saved both of us.”

“What do you think I am? There’s plenty of things that are impossible for me.”

“That’s not it! You didn’t even hesitate to let Nazuna-san go!”

I’m sure there was some way to stop Nazuna-san without pulling me away. Sakurako-san’s sophistry influences peoples’ hearts, just like Emiko Endou and Hanabusa. They can either be frustrating, or control people with their clever words.

“It would have been better if I could’ve stopped Nazuna-san for a few more seconds, or even a step sooner, right? Isozaki-sensei was there to help me, too. Utsumi-san hasn’t given the signal yet. You’re lucky I stalled him for long enough!”

Nazuna-san had been driven into a corner, and didn’t have any options left. He didn’t lose his life in the end, but at that moment, I’m sure that something important inside of him died.

“You thought it would be okay to let him die… Didn’t you? With Toudou-san, too… You’d prioritised the baby’s life. You should have pointed out the drug right away and sent him to the hospital. ”

“There’s no problem with that! The baby and Nazuna are both alive. Everything turned out fine,” Sakurako-san raises her voice, gradually growing impatient.

The heat reflecting off the asphalt spurs on our anger.

“Why can’t you understand?! You did something wrong!” I shout.

People passing by are staring at us. Sakurako-san trembles for a moment.

“Death is equal to everyone. That’s why every life has to be given the same weight. Only a God can measure that weight.”

“That’s just what religious people and idealists say,” Sakurako-san laughs.

“It may be an idealistic argument, but Shitara-sensei, your uncle, would say the same thing.”

“…What?”

“You want to be like him, don’t you? You have to be able to calmly make decisions that involve other peoples’ lives, or else you’ll never be the same as him.”

“I wasn’t…”

“In the end, you’re no different from a bratty, nasty child! A child that knows it’s wrong to steal sweets, but thinks it’s fine as long as they aren’t caught. You don’t even understand *why* it’s wrong.”

She doesn’t make excuses or try to prove her innocence.

“You don’t have to understand. If it’s impossible for you, it can’t be helped. I know you still want to protect your family, like Shitara-sensei. Think about how you feel about that. You shouldn't get to decide the value of someone else’s life, otherwise you’ll just end up making more families who have lost a loved one!”

“It’s not like I want people to die!”

“No! You’re not denying death! If I hear about someone’s death, it makes me feel awful! You don’t care about if someone dies unless it happens right in front of you. You think people are just an object as soon as they die. Tell me, Sakurako-san, would you like to be turned into a skeletal specimen when you die?”

“…”

Sakurako-san chokes back her reply. She doesn’t argue with me. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen her make such a timid, surprised expression.

“Never, ever think of any death as a good thing. No matter who it is, whether they were a good or bad person. Don’t make any exceptions,” I say, staring straight at her.

I notice that I have to look down a bit to look at her. I guess I’ve finally grown taller than her, I just never noticed before.

“Please, don’t ever try to throw another person’s life away again.”

I grab both of her shoulders. Even though we’re standing under the summer sun, she feels cold. Rather than brushing my hands away like she normally does, she just quietly looks at her feet.

“…What if agreeing causes more people to die?”

“What?”

“Nazuna was recruiting suicidal people and killing them. Mr. Toudou tried to kill the baby. If I had stopped Ms. Kimiko, Mr. Toudou would have continued to kill infants until the day he died. Do you think that it would be right to let them live?” Sakurako-san says, looking up at me.

Her dark eyes are devoid of any expression.

“Do you understand? I don’t care about good and evil, I’m only thinking of the numbers, boy.”

Her voice is monotone, almost robotic.

“…Then you’re just the same as Hanabusa.”

Sakurako-san doesn’t respond. She pushes me off and walks away. The crossing signal has changed. Crowds of people are walking past me. Isozaki-sensei said before that Sakurako-san isn’t normal. Of course, I already knew that. Some people don’t think or act like everyone else because of how they were raised, or from past experiences. Most people have a

“reason” why they’re abnormal. But Sakurako-san is different. She doesn’t have a “reason.” It has nothing to do with her upbringing, she was born different. That’s why she would end up like Phantom without her rules. The feeling of being scorched by the midsummer sun only adds to my frustration. Sakurako-san has already gone far enough that I can hardly make her out from the heat mirage on the road.

Epilogue

It’s been several days since meeting up with Ms. Kimiko by the station, but I still haven’t heard from Sakurako-san. At first, I didn’t care that she wasn’t talking to me, especially since I didn’t know what to say or how to act after our argument. It’s summer break, so I spend my time hanging out with my grandpas and my friends.

But something odd happened around Obon. Even when I called the Kujou house, nobody answered. I thought it was strange, so I emailed Sawa-san to ask if anything happened. He said that they went on a trip, and Sawa-san was taking care of Hector in the meantime. I’m relieved to hear that those two are travelling together. I consider messaging them, but I don’t know what to say, and I don’t want to bother them, so I decide not to say anything,

A few days later, on the last day of summer break, Kougami asks, “are they really on a trip?” which makes me anxious.

I try asking Sawa-san, but he doesn’t know where they went or when they’ll get back. They haven’t even contacted him. He’s getting worried, too. Shouko-san doesn’t know anything, either. Ariwara-san is working, so nobody can get in touch with him.

I’m scared, so I send an email to them, but I don’t get an answer. I try visiting the Kujou house, but the gate is locked. I ask around at the other houses in the neighbourhood, but all they know is that they’ll be away for a while. Nobody knows anything about their trip. It’s like they just suddenly disappeared.

To add to my annoyance, it suddenly starts raining violently. The thunder is loud enough that it feels like an earthquake. I walk while pushing my bike. Before I know it, I’m near Isozaki-sensei’s apartment. I try to stop at his place, but he’s not home, so I decide to just head back to my own house. Just as I’m leaving, we bump into each other, since he was just returning home with groceries.

He gives me Roman chamomile tea to warm me up. It’s bitter and doesn’t taste very good, but somehow it feels like it’s exactly what I needed.

I tell Isozaki-sensei about how Sakurako-san disappeared, but he doesn’t seem concerned.

“There’s nothing you can do about it. She’s her own person, with her own thoughts and feelings. Nobody can stop a butterfly from flying where it wants to go.”

“Please don’t use butterflies in your metaphors at a time like this! How are you not worried at all? They disappeared really suddenly!”

He looks at me calmly and says, “whether you knew about it before or not, it’s still goodbye in the end. As long as time continues on, your time with people will always come to an

end eventually, and new flowers will grow in their place. Do you understand what I’m saying? Shoutarou, not all flowers will bloom in the same place.”